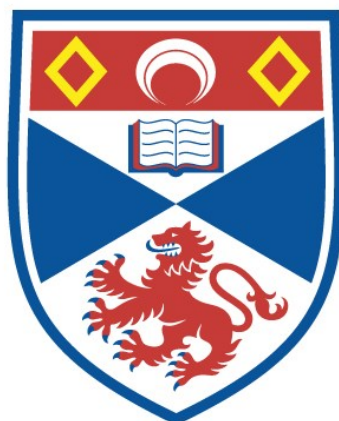


# THEOLOGY THROUGH THE LOOKING-GLASS : LITERARY NONSENSE AND THE CHRISTIAN IMAGINATION

Josephine Gabelman

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD  
at the  
University of St Andrews



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# **Theology Through the Looking-Glass: Literary Nonsense and the Christian Imagination**

By  
Josephine Gabelman

A Thesis Submitted in Completion of the Requirement for the Degree Doctor of  
Philosophy in Divinity

September 2012

St Mary's College  
The University of St Andrews

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I, Josephine Gabelman, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 80,000 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

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## Abstract

This project is an investigation into the character of the Christian imagination. It examines in depth three central aspects: paradox, anarchy and the childlike, acknowledging that within each category there is something of the unreasonable or non-rational. Rather than trying to iron out or explain away the logically problematic, the thesis explores the possibility that an idea can be contrary to rationality and yet be true and meaningful. It is demonstrated that a number of central tenets of the Christian doctrine require a faith that often goes beyond reason or does not exclusively identify with it.

The study involves the systematic analysis of central stylistic features of literary nonsense using Lewis Carroll's famous *Alice* stories as exemplar. The construction of a non-pejorative model of nonsense is then used to introduce analogous components of Christian theology with a particular focus on the doctrine of Salvation. Sparked by G. K. Chesterton's description of the Fall as the condition of 'being born upside-down', soteriology is conceived of as a topsy-turvy reorientation of the will and an imaginative attunement to the absurd.

The project culminates in the setting-up of a nonsense theology by considering the practical and evangelical ramifications of associating Christian faith with nonsense literature; and conversely, the value of relating theological principles to the study of literary nonsense. Ultimately, the research suggests that faith is always a risk and that a strictly rational apologetic misrepresents the nature of Christian truth.



## Acknowledgements

This project would have been hard to begin and impossible to finish without the dedication and erudition of my supervisor Gavin Hopps, who has guided me with a meticulous and humble brilliance through the intricacies of triune theology to the correct use of the apostrophe.

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To little Lambie, for whom this thesis is a long response to a short question: ‘how can you believe such nonsense?’ My hope is that you might read this and find an answer, but better still that you might come to tea and continue the serious nonsense of friendship and joy.

There is not a part of this project that is not indebted to my dearest parents who have given me from birth an imaginative fearlessness and a sense of unlimited possibility. It was in their relationship that I first saw childlike playfulness and in their arms that I first glimpsed sacrificial love.

Lastly, to Danny, who led me into his fairytale and trampled down the thorns. Thank you for holding my hand and for covering my eyes at the scary parts. May we grow young together, venture boldly into the unknown, travel the world and lick its paint.





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## **Prologue: An Irrational Apology**

*Has God not made foolish the wisdom of the world?*

1 Corinthians 1:20

A major problem confronting any apologetic account of Christianity is that certain crucial tenets of the faith seem to carry us the other side of reason. However, whilst Christianity has always had a sense that its claims will appear foolish from a certain perspective, a dominant strand of its traditional self-exposition has sought to demonstrate its conformity to Western standards of reason. As a result, the importance of ‘a-rational’ modalities of faith has been significantly downplayed. In response to this widespread underemphasis, this thesis calls for a corrective balance of reason with unreason, logic with paradox, scepticism with credulity as well as the recovery of a number of other biblical themes side-lined by the rationalistic tendencies of modernity. In sum, the hypothesis explores the idea that in certain crucial ways Christian teaching runs counter to the customary secular practices of reason. The primary method by which this is articulated is through an on-going dialogue with nonsense literature, focussing on the work of Lewis Carroll. In this way, I hope to demonstrate that some of the structural devices used in literary nonsense share a deep resemblance with and cast new light on traditional modes of religious thought.

Part One of the thesis discusses the character and the role of the imagination in Christian belief. Three aspects of this are seen as central: the paradoxical, the anarchic and the childlike. The first chapter considers a range of apparently incompatible claims within Christian doctrine and suggests, in view of this, that paradox is an essential feature of the Christian imagination. The areas examined include the epistemological paradox of transcendent and immanent knowledge; paradoxical accounts of time and space within Christology; the logical problem of the Incarnation; the traditional numerical conundrum

of the Trinity; and the relationship between freewill and grace. These puzzles are customarily seen as a result of linguistic limitation (where the claim is accepted) or as a way of deflecting attention away from empty premises (where the claim is rejected). In contrast, I offer a description of these tensions as ‘theoretic’<sup>1</sup> paradoxes, which convey an accurate description of essential ‘illogicalities’, acknowledging their importance as tenets of Christian faith, whilst recognising that this represents a departure from the commonly upheld law of non-contradiction. The aim of this section is to show how thinking in paradoxical terms is a vital component of the Christian imagination since it allows the believer to hold these contraries in a meaningful tension.

The second chapter concentrates on the interval of suspense between Christ’s defeat and his reign to come. In particular, the focus is on the implications of the teaching that the Kingdom of God is situated both in the ‘now and the not yet’, and the correlative belief that Christ is absolutely sovereign even though his sovereignty has in some sense not yet come into its fullness of divine rule. The term I use to describe the experience of living in this epoch of ‘eschatological suspension’, between Christ’s victory and the final establishment of his Kingdom, is ‘anarchy’. The aim of the section is to show how during this ‘in-between time’ it may be advantageous for the Christian to develop an anarchic imagination in order to live faithfully in this era of dual temporalities.

The third part of the project seeks to recover the ‘childlike’ as a category of the religious imagination. I discuss the significance of the gospel declaration that only those who change and become like children can enter the Kingdom of Heaven and ask whether the term ‘childlike’ is a necessary description or merely an analogy of peripheral significance to Christian faith. In essence, I consider this injunction to ‘change’ to involve

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<sup>1</sup> W. D. Hart distinguishes between linguistic or ‘semantic’ paradoxes and logical or ‘theoretic’ paradoxes, suggesting that in the first instance there is an *appearance* of the paradoxical, conceding that the contradiction is ultimately solvable. In the case of ‘theoretic’ paradox the core of the conflict is a logically irreconcilable tension. For an initial outline see W. D. Hart, *The Evolution of Logic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 67.

an imaginative re-orientation towards a childlike mode of relating to God as Father. There are several qualities that this transformation seems to demand: an attitude of simplicity, trust, wonder, and the ability to indulge in make-believe or to *play* at faith. On the basis of this I conclude that the childlike is not simply a phase of being before God, but the ongoing ideal of that relationship. The aim of this section is to show how the adoption of a childlike posture fosters a mode of imaginative play that opens up the possibility for a genuine encounter with God. In general, I suggest that this attitude, though born in the imagination, may nevertheless involve real development and transformation. The childlike, together with the anarchic and the paradoxical, I believe, go some way to describing the necessary role the imagination plays in Christian faith and its divergence from the dominant Enlightenment model of rationality.

In Part Two of the thesis, after considering how each of these aspects of the religious imagination comes into conflict with a secular construal of reality, I develop a counter-theology of nonsense, and explore the theoretical, practical and evangelical implications of associating nonsense literature with Christian faith. Of particular concern is the response of the non-believer to the apparent unreason of religious claims. I suggest that ‘nonsense’ has the potential to be a peculiarly useful descriptor in the communication of the Christian message, since in accepting the atheist’s application of unreason the believer necessarily challenges the presumption that because it is unreasonable it is therefore untrue. Prompted by the work of G. K. Chesterton, I conceive of the Fall as ‘the condition of being born upside down’ and in this light consider an imaginative reordering of our notions of the possible as a vital aspect of faith. This provides the underlying warrant for offering ‘nonsense’ as an illuminating and hitherto unexplored way of conceptualising Christian theology.

## Introduction: A Brief History of Faith and Reason

*Every man is stupid and without knowledge.*

Jeremiah 10:14

In a general sense this project is concerned with the longstanding opposition between faith and reason—the conflict, reconciliation or deconstruction of which has been an abiding concern throughout Christian history. Thus, in order to contextualise the investigation it will be helpful to begin with a short overview of the development of this antagonism within the history of religion. An obvious place to begin is with the wisdom of the Greek philosophers, with *philos sophia*, the love of reason, which seeks to understand the nature of how things are.

Traditionally, the philosopher's elevation of reason presupposes a faith in its ability to discover and reliably describe that which is. A central feature buttressing this faith in reason is the law of non-contradiction—a fundamental precept of classical logic, which is, for the most part, presented as an undisputed arbiter of sound reasoning. The modern philosopher and theologian James Anderson serves as exemplar of this assumption; he affirms: 'what is deemed unacceptable is for some person to speak against or deny some proposition *whilst also affirming* that same proposition. Such a practice is invariably viewed as the height of irrationality'.<sup>2</sup> Nearly two and half thousand years earlier Aristotle articulated the same rule: 'if whenever an assertion is true its denial is false and when the latter is true its affirmation is false, there can be no such thing as simultaneously asserting and denying the same thing truly'.<sup>3</sup> Logician J. C. Beall observes likewise: 'that no contradiction is true remains an entrenched 'unassailable dogma' of Western thought'.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> James Anderson, *Paradox in Christian Theology* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007), p. 108.

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. Christopher Kirwan (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 1008a34, p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> Graham Priest, J. C. Beall and Bradley Armour-Gard, (eds.) *The Law of Non-Contradiction* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004); J. C. Beall 'Introduction: At the Intersection', pp. 2-3. It is worth noting that



Although the Greek philosophers did not have the Judeo-Christian concept of a relationship with a personal god, this period is nonetheless indispensable in charting the interaction between faith and reason, as Paul Helm observes: ‘the classical period provided the tools of reason which are applied to faith and have been ever since’.<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, Aristotle along with Plato sought to show how religious sensitivity evolves from rational inquiry. Plato believed it was the *rational* aspect of his tripartite theory of the soul that yearned after truth and that alone could discover the real. Furthermore, Plato claimed, ‘it [is] appropriate for the rational element to rule, because it is wise and takes thought for the entire soul’.<sup>6</sup> So we find in the Hellenic period both a sensitivity to spiritual truths but also the foundations of rationalism with an ultimate emphasis on the primacy of reason. Accordingly, when the teachings of Christ and the apostles arrived in Athens there was much that St. Paul found in common with Greek philosophy, but also a substantial amount that did not accord with the superior wisdom of the Greeks.

The biblical confrontation of issues of faith and reason is of course an area of enormous complexity and my aim here is only briefly to sketch an outline. But even a cursory summary, however, should recognise that the New Testament presents truth both in accordance with classical reason and also as its antithesis. According to the book of Acts, Paul ‘*reasoned* [...] from the Scriptures, *explaining* and *proving* that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead’.<sup>7</sup> Here the emphasis is on Christianity’s reasonability; those who believed ‘were *persuaded*’.

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scholars tend to recognise three versions of Aristotle’s description of the law of non-contradiction: an ontological variant, a doxastic or psychological form, and a semantic version. Paula Gottlieb writing in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* explains: ‘The first version is about things that exist in the world, the second is about what we can believe, and the third relates to assertion and truth’. Gottlieb indicates that it is not clear which of these strains Aristotle intends as the core foundation of the rule. However, for the purpose of our investigation the ontological version—the statement: ‘it is impossible to predicate contraries simultaneously’ (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1007b17, p. 12)—will take precedence, since this tends to be the most common application of the law, and indeed, provides the greatest potential for hostility to statements that seem to oppose the law.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Helm, (ed.) *Faith and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Tom Griffith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 441 E, p. 138.

<sup>7</sup> English Standard Version (Wheaton, Illinois: Good News Publishers, 2001), Acts 17: 2-3, my

On the other hand, Paul gives equal emphasis to the view that Christianity appears as folly to the wisdom of the Greek philosophers. In his letter to the Corinthians, he writes: ‘Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the Cross be emptied of its power’.<sup>8</sup> Here, Paul seems to caution against the presentation of religious truths in synthesis with a contemporary understanding of good reason. Instead, Paul associates the gospel message with foolishness, and yet at the same time undercuts this emphasis by preaching that ‘the foolishness of God is wiser than men’.<sup>9</sup> Given these two contrasting attitudes, then, how can we accurately characterize the approach of the New Testament to the dialogue between faith and reason?

The biblical teaching that God alone is wise has often led theologians to downplay or sidestep the reality of this foolishness, perhaps because wisdom seems the more appealing characteristic, especially if the theologian is engaged in apologetics. But the truth that Paul teaches clearly entails a dual dimension: Christianity is both supremely wise *and* supremely foolish. The wisdom that the world does not understand not only seems like folly, but indeed it *is* folly by the world’s standards. Festus is thus in a certain sense correct when he tells Paul that he is out of his mind, and yet Paul is also correct in his affirmation that he is not mad but speaking rationally.<sup>10</sup> Therefore an accurate depiction of the biblical attitude to issues of faith and reason seems to involve a direct challenge to Aristotle’s law of non-contradiction in order to uphold the affirmation that faith is both rational and a scandal to reason.

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emphasis.

<sup>8</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:17. ‘Eloquent wisdom’ is the translation of σοφία meaning clever and wise. See also note below.

<sup>9</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:25. Here, Paul draws on the classical concepts of wisdom and folly (‘*moros*’ and ‘*sophos*’) but inverts their roles by applying a different standard of wisdom that has the outward appearance of *moros*.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Festus said with a loud voice, “Paul, you are out of your mind; your great learning is driving you out of your mind.” But Paul said, “I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words”’. Acts 26:24-25.

Broadly speaking, the Christian conjunction of reason and faith seems less complicated in the patristic period that followed, or rather less strikingly paradoxical, as this era by and large can be characterised by Augustine's desire 'to understand what we believe',<sup>11</sup> an idea that forms a central part of his work *De Libero Arbitrio*, written between 387 and 395. Augustine's influential thought established a clear order: faith is primary; reason is always a secondary aid to theological reflection since belief comes before understanding. On the one hand, Augustine defines theology as 'reasoning or discussion about the Divinity',<sup>12</sup> and describes the Christian God as 'a God who gives blessedness to the rational and intelligent soul'.<sup>13</sup> We cannot therefore dismiss the importance Augustine places on human reason. And yet, elsewhere, in his work *City of God*, Augustine rebukes 'the unbelievers' who 'demand a rational proof from us when we proclaim the miracles of God'. He observes that 'since we cannot supply this proof of those matters (for they are beyond the powers of the human mind) the unbelievers assume that our statements are false'.<sup>14</sup> Here Augustine does not deny that certain acts of God seem unlikely or impossible, but impresses upon the reader the reality of the limitations of his own reason, suggesting that we should not expect to be able to understand all aspects of divinity in a rational manner. Indeed, Augustine interprets rationality as a gift from God that is itself beyond human understanding.<sup>15</sup>

By the sixth century, Pseudo-Dionysius had laid a greater stress on the *via negativa* and with this emphasis came the idea that religious revelation can seem contrary to common sense. 'The man in union with truth', he writes, 'knows clearly that all is well with him, even if everyone else thinks that he has gone out of his mind'.<sup>16</sup> Denys' desire

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<sup>11</sup> Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1993), p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 2003), bk. VIII, Ch. 1, p. 298.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 299.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., bk. XXI Ch. 5, p. 971.

<sup>15</sup> 'It is in no trivial measure that a man understands and knows God, when he understands and knows that this knowledge and understanding is itself the gift of God'. Ibid., bk. XVII, Ch. 4, p. 721.

<sup>16</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names* in *Pseudo-Dionysius The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1987), p. 110.

to provide a faithful theological account leads him to describe God using paradoxical expressions such as ‘brilliant darkness’.<sup>17</sup> One of the advantages Denys saw in using paradox to speak of God is that it prevents the individual from fixating upon any single attribute or manifestation; God can be praised in the same breath for his meekness and for his majesty. Denys’ commitment to paradox is such that he even undercuts his own apophatic method by maintaining that in addition to being ‘beyond every assertion’, God is also ‘beyond privations [and] beyond every denial’.<sup>18</sup> Denys’ paradoxical account of God seems to imply therefore that strict obedience to the law of non-contradiction cannot provide a satisfactory description of the divine. The principle that God is beyond all assertions cannot logically be held together with the notion that God is equally beyond all privations; a thing that is fully meek cannot not also be supremely majestic, unless of course it is accepted that paradoxical statements can provide an accurate means of describing reality.

Whilst the Medieval theologians never lost sight of Denys’ practice of speaking paradoxically in an attempt to signify the divine, the significant landmark in the dialogue between faith and reason in the Middle Ages was of course the rediscovery of Aristotle, and by the latter half of the thirteenth century the re-integration of Greek logic into Christian dialogue was firmly established. The masterful assimilation of Aristotelian reason into Christian theology by Aquinas (1225-1274) has come to be seen by many as the beginning of a deeply rationalised Christianity and the prioritisation of reason over mystery. Whilst there is without doubt an element of truth in this, it is easy to misunderstand Aquinas’ view of reason on account of its distorted reflection in Enlightenment theism. As Rowan Williams points out, for Aquinas ‘*intellectus* [...] is a rich and comprehensive term which is totally misrepresented if understood as referring to

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<sup>17</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, *Mystical Theology* in *Pseudo-Dionysius The Complete Works*, p. 135.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

the discursive intellect'.<sup>19</sup> Thomas' extensive application of reason always finds its genesis in his prayerful contemplation of a transcendent deity. 'His arguments', Chesterton observes, 'are rational and natural; but his own deduction is all for the supernatural'.<sup>20</sup>

It could be suggested that what Aquinas' work most significantly reveals is that the great quarrel between reason and faith had not yet arrived. Chesterton, for example, believed that Aquinas 'belonged to an age of intellectual unconsciousness, to an age of intellectual innocence',<sup>21</sup> and perhaps this, more than anything, characterises the Medieval response to issues of faith and reason. Certainly there was a strong urge to systematise Christian theology and demonstrate its inherent coherence, but without the modern distinction between the theologian and the philosopher, the objectives of philosophy were met and satisfied in Christian metaphysics. Paul Helm describes the reintroduction of Aristotle into theological thought as 'a synthesis and not a take-over',<sup>22</sup> and one of the principal reasons that Helm's hypothesis seems true and that Hellenic discourse did not usurp Medieval piety is that scholasticism always remained sceptical about the role of reason, using it as a means of *interacting* with an already established faith, not by way of primary justification for that belief.

Throughout the work of Anselm, the father of the scholastic tradition, we can further trace the Medieval sense of harmony between rational argumentation and meditative devotion. In his *Proslogion* (1077-1078) Anselm writes: 'I give thanks to You, since what I believed before through your free gift I now so understand through Your illumination'.<sup>23</sup> In this sentence, we again witness the acknowledgment that both belief and illumination—faith and reason—are gifted from God to the individual. This supports

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<sup>19</sup> Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990), p. 125.

<sup>20</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *St Thomas Aquinas* (London: Hodder and Stroughton, 1933), p. 37.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Helm, *Faith and Reason*, pp. 85-6.

<sup>23</sup> St. Anselm, 'Proslogion' in *The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 89.

the case that many Medieval philosophers did not see faith and reason in antagonism with each other, but believed like Augustine that both reason and faith were gifts from God

Yet, alongside the development of a 'rationalized' scholasticism, the Medieval period is also known for its embrace of mystical theology<sup>24</sup> and the tradition of holy folly. John Saward remarks on the unlikely juxtaposition of folly with the schoolmen and asks 'why was it that the golden age of the fool coincided with the age of scholasticism?'<sup>25</sup> Saward answers his question by suggesting that 'in the late Middle Ages there is an unselfconscious revelling in mirth, joy, and good humour of life in Christ'.<sup>26</sup> Saward thus gestures to an important feature of this 'intellectually innocent' age, which is the idea that scholastic endeavour could co-exist happily with mystic ecstasy and foolish revelry because there was an implicit understanding of the interwovenness between reason, folly and mystery.

However, Mark A. McIntosh in his book *Mystical Theology* tells a different story altogether. He describes how 'during this period of the rise of scholastic theology there were also shifting trends in Christian spirituality that made it harder for the two realms of life to communicate, let alone nourish each other'.<sup>27</sup> For example, he believes that there is an awareness throughout Lady Julian's writing that her mode of theological engagement as a mystic was unlikely to be respected. McIntosh believes that this is because 'the ecclesiastical and academic culture of her era was already less than open to the insights of someone situated far from the impressively authoritative halls of the university'.<sup>28</sup> Here we are faced with the suggestion that far from an era of 'intellectual innocence', the later Middle Ages were in fact an epoch dominated by an intellectualised Christianity, which rather than embracing the words of fools and mystics, inhibited this avenue of spiritual

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<sup>24</sup> Some of the great mystics date from this period, such as Meister Eckhart (c. 1260 – 1327) and Lady Julian of Norwich (c. 1342 – after 1416).

<sup>25</sup> John Saward, *Perfect Fools: Folly for Christ's Sake in Catholic and Orthodox Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 81.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>27</sup> Mark A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 63.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

discourse. ‘The real tragedy’, McIntosh writes, ‘is that by the later Middle Ages fewer and fewer saints, mystics and theologians still knew how to knit spirituality and theology together in their own life and work’.<sup>29</sup>

It is hard to decide, given the complexity of the issue, whether McIntosh or Saward offers the more realistic portrayal of the character of Medieval theology. However, either way it is clear that the following period—the Renaissance and Reformation—radically disrupted the Medieval synthesis of faith and reason and established a divide between God’s revelation and man’s rationality. Some element of this divide we can assume stemmed from the scholastic flourishing of the Medieval church and the extensive influence of Aristotelian logic.

As we move into the first half of the sixteenth century, a dominant figure in the discussion between faith and reason is of course Martin Luther (1483-1546). Luther argued that reason outside of grace is bound by sin and that reason therefore can never form the sole basis from which religious truth is articulated.<sup>30</sup> Within the history of faith and reason, Luther presents a strong case against the elevation of reason, arguing instead for the primacy of faith. He cautions the Christian in strong terms: ‘away with reason, which is an enemy to faith’.<sup>31</sup> Luther’s more extreme denunciations of reason as ‘impious and sacrilegious’<sup>32</sup> or most famously as ‘the Devil’s bride’<sup>33</sup> are frequently quoted, though the impression they encourage leaves out the nuances of Luther’s dialogue with reason; for it is not that he is hostile to reason in all its manifestations. Indeed, in his response before the Diet of Worms in 1521 he states: ‘Unless I am convinced by the

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>30</sup> McGrath describes how ‘Luther’s fundamental point is that “the Fall” is first and foremost a fall from faith’. McGrath, *Christian Theology*, p. 155. The implication of this belief for Luther is the understanding that atonement requires, above all, faith and that to seek God’s justification through any other means (such as rationalized argumentation or the practice of indulgences) is wrong. As a result Ephesians 2:8-10 became a central verse for Luther’s teaching.

<sup>31</sup> Martin Luther, *A Commentary on Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians*, trans. J. Duncan (London: Paternoster, 1830), p. 94.

<sup>32</sup> Martin Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, trans. Henry Cole (Digireads.com Publishing, 2009), p. 106.

<sup>33</sup> Martin Luther, ‘Second Sunday in Epiphany’ 17<sup>th</sup> January 1546, *Dr Martin Luther’s Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, trans. H. G. Ganss (Weimar: Herman Boehlaus Nachfolger, 1914), Vol. 51, p. 126.

testimony of the Scriptures *or by clear reason* [...] I cannot and will not retract anything'.<sup>34</sup> Here it is evident that Luther trusts the conviction of his own reasoning, which might suggest that when he speaks antagonistically it is because he believes reason is in a particular instance being used in a manner other than that which God intended.

Generally speaking, however, Luther did see reason as an inadequate and impoverished method of comprehending divine matters. 'Reason', he writes, 'interprets the Scriptures of God by her own inferences and syllogisms [...] how foolish she is in tacking her inferences onto the Scriptures'.<sup>35</sup> The Gospel, by contrast, Luther explains, 'leadeth us beyond and above the light of the law and reason, into the deep secrets of faith, where the law and reason have nothing to do'.<sup>36</sup> Faith and salvation for the reformers were seen as gifts that cannot be attained through human reason, and it was during the popularisation of their views that the concept of faith underwent a distinct shift from *fides* to *fiducia*, from faith *that* to faith *in*.<sup>37</sup>

By the beginning of the seventeenth century the extreme volatility of the Reformation period had largely abated. Yet growing incompatibility between scientific and religious claims brought about a different set of circumstances whereby faith and reason again came into conflict. The Galileo controversy concerning the geocentric model of the solar system engendered a greater schism, whereby church leaders saw certain advances in science as heretical, and scientists such as Galileo found religious authorities intolerant and ignorant. John Lewis believes that the most prominent effect of the Galileo affair, in particular his trial and imprisonment, was that it 'helped in no small measure to create that perceived separation of faith from reason, of religion from physical

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<sup>34</sup> Quoted in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, (ed.) Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 182, my emphasis.

<sup>35</sup> Martin Luther, *The Bondage of Will*, cited in *Faith and Reason*, (ed.) Paul Helm, p. 140.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> For a further discussion on the different interpretations of faith in the Reformation period see Alister E. McGrath *Reformation Thought* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), p. 115-137.



sciences’.<sup>38</sup> Certainly, it was during the seventeenth century that the establishment of the modern polarity between science and religion took root. Science started to be perceived as the authoritative voice in matters of the phenomenal world, and as a result, religion began to be confined to the territory *beyond* the physical. However, as one historian observes, ‘the great scientists of the seventeenth century, including Kepler, Galileo and Newton, had pursued their work in a spirit of exalting God not undermining Christianity’,<sup>39</sup> and so it is not totally accurate to characterize the seventeenth century as the establishment of the radical schism between religious faith and scientific reason. Nevertheless, the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century inevitably gave weight to the religious scepticism that arrived with the Enlightenment in the century that followed.

Within the history of faith and reason, the Enlightenment is the high water-mark of rationality; although it is important to note, as McGrath does, that ‘the Middle Ages was just as much an “Age of Reason” as the Enlightenment; the crucial difference lay in the manner in which reason was used, and the limits which were understood to be imposed on it’.<sup>40</sup> Enlightenment thinkers such as Kant (1724-1804) wanted to see theology develop within the limits of reason alone and, arguably, as a result, lost sight of the careful qualifications maintained by the pre-moderns. Kant declared instead: ‘The *public* use of reason must at all times be free, and it alone can bring about Enlightenment among men’.<sup>41</sup>

The Enlightenment recast rationality in its own image, the guiding sentiment of which Isaiah Berlin describes as the conviction that ‘all principles of explanation

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<sup>38</sup> John Lewis, *Galileo in France: French Reactions to the Theories and Trial of Galileo* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), p. 15.

<sup>39</sup> Jackson J. Spielvogel, *Western Civilisation, Volume B: 1300-1815* (Boston: Wadsworth, 2006), pp. 514-5.

<sup>40</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p. 87.

<sup>41</sup> Immanuel Kant, ‘An Answer to the question: What Is Enlightenment?’ trans. James Schmidt, published in *What is Enlightenment?* (ed.) James Schmidt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 59.

everywhere must be the same'.<sup>42</sup> This of course extended from practices of law, politics and science to philosophy and religion. Hence, religion for many believers became an 'enlightenment theism', which according to McGrath had two major consequences: 'First, Christianity was in effect *reduced* to those ideas which could be proved by reason [...] and second, reason was understood to take priority over revelation'.<sup>43</sup> Gavin Hyman, who argues that atheism is 'roughly contemporaneous with the birth of modernity',<sup>44</sup> also describes how one of the major differences between Medieval and modern theism was modernity's dissatisfaction with abstract theology and the desire for a more normative and rationalized religion. Hyman believes 'Hume and Kant demonstrated how their frameworks disallowed, in principle, any substantive metaphysical knowledge of God'.<sup>45</sup>

The chief sentiments of the Enlightenment thus expanded into the modern period; scientific advancement in biology and geology continued to broaden the gulf between reason and faith; evidentialism and verificationism gained popularity as the accurate means of testing the validity of a statement; empirical proof was the stipulation of many rationalists and religious truths simply could not satisfy these new demands. For this reason Hume's essay disparaging the miraculous basis of Christian belief in 1748 was taken seriously, as was Locke's earlier request for faith to show itself in accord with reason. 'Faith', Locke taught, 'can never convince us of anything that contradicts our knowledge'.<sup>46</sup>

Whilst some believers greatly supported the Enlightenment task of bringing religion in line with modern rationalization, others reacted strongly against this. Johann Georg Hamann (1730-1788), for example, one of the fathers of German Romanticism, wrote passionately against the attempt to redefine faith in accordance with this strict

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<sup>42</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 279.

<sup>43</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology*, p. 214.

<sup>44</sup> Gavin Hyman, *A Short History of Atheism* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), p. 2.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>46</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (London: T. Tegg and Son, 1836), p. 529.

application of rationality. In his essay, 'Metacritique on the purism of reason', Hamann argued that 'analysis is nothing more than the latest fashionable cut, and synthesis nothing more than the artful seam of a professional leather or cloth-cutter'.<sup>47</sup> At the time, Hamann's rebuttal did not pose a significant hindrance to the rationalists. Berlin believes that this was because Hamann was one of few vocal dissenters against the swift imperialisation of reason.<sup>48</sup> In the year of Hamann's death, however, an influential ally in the revolt against the supreme rationalization of thought was born.

Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) was among the first of the nineteenth century philosophers to dissent from the belief that the universe is ultimately rational. Instead, he developed a proto-Nietzschean rejection of the ultimacy of reason and introduced a pre-Freudian emphasis on desire and drive as what constitutes the knowing of the self. Schopenhauer was critical of Kant and Hegel<sup>49</sup> for their belief that reason is the founding principle of a just society, and their reliance upon logic as the way of reaching this truth. Like Hamann before him, Schopenhauer sought to dethrone reason from its imperial reign: 'He argues that rationality confers on us no higher moral status than that of other sentient beings'.<sup>50</sup>

Schopenhauer is an interesting figure to consider from a theological perspective, since on the one hand it would seem in the interests of religion to qualify the claims for an entirely rational justification for belief. Yet on the other hand, his work argued for the possibility of achieving moral excellence without religion and so he is in this sense an unlikely ally for the church. His book *On the Basis of Morality* is concerned primarily

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<sup>47</sup> Johann Georg Hamann, *Writings on Philosophy and Language*, (ed.) Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 217.

<sup>48</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment*, p. 279. 'He [Hamann] attacked the entire outlook in every particular; and feeling himself a David chosen by the Lord to smite this vast and horrible Goliath, he marched into battle alone'.

<sup>49</sup> Although Hegel argued for a supremely rationalized noumena, in order for this rationality to be effective in society he believed that the individual must abstract from the realm of phenomenal experience since within everyday reality he claimed there is a 'law of contradiction' operative. So, although Hegel gives fuel to the Age of Reason, he nevertheless raises a specific objection to the law of non-contradiction by stating that the phenomenal is in a state of becoming and constant flux.

<sup>50</sup> Christopher Janaway, (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Schopenhauer* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 6.

with critiquing the Kantian dependence upon God as the only possible postulate for moral behaviour. Instead, Schopenhauer argues, gallantry, selflessness and compassion are ‘universal and occur irrespective of religion’.<sup>51</sup> The separation of the religious from the moral led Schopenhauer to associate religion with the irrational and with superstition. This interest in the sociological and psychological explanation of religious belief was continued after his death, culminating at the turn of the century in Freud’s declaration that religious belief compensates the need for a father-figure.

Freud (1856-1939) expressed the view that whilst religion had once been beneficial to the civilisation of humanity, the rational development of the human race meant that there was no longer a social need to believe in religion, and that those who tried to maintain its importance did so for psychological reasons. Freud sided with the empirical atheism of his age when he spoke of the inevitable demise of religious belief driven by a heightened rationality. ‘In the long run’, he wrote, ‘nothing can withstand reason and experience, and the contradiction which religion offers to both is all too palpable. Even purified religious ideas can not escape this fate, so long as they try to preserve anything of the consolation of religion’.<sup>52</sup> Freud’s ideas contributed to the spread of secular modernity by attempting to reduce religious belief to a psychological phenomenon, and by continuing the subjection of religious ideas to criticism set within the limits established by the Enlightenment.

Of course not all nineteenth-century thinkers accepted the need to acquiesce to the demands posited by the empiricists. Kierkegaard’s existentialism, for example, recalled the pre-modern delimitations of reason: ‘human reason’, he cautioned, ‘has boundaries’.<sup>53</sup> In the face of the preoccupation with rationality Kierkegaard (1813-1855) described

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<sup>51</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1998), p. 201.

<sup>52</sup> Sigmund Freud quoted in *On Freud’s “The Future of an Illusion”*, (eds.) Mary Kay O’Neil and Salman Alchta (London: Karnac Books, 2009), p. 60.

<sup>53</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers A-E Volume*, (eds.) Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (London: Indiana University Press, 1967), p. 5.

belief as a leap and faith as a risk, claiming ‘the absurd and faith are inseparables’.<sup>54</sup> Kierkegaard’s conjunction of absurdity and Christian faith shares obvious parallels with the pairing of literary nonsense and theology, which we will be discussing in greater detail in the final chapter. For the present, however, it is worth noting that Kierkegaard is a central figure in the dispute against the universal validity of the law of non-contradiction for the chief reason that he held paradox as a logically baffling but integral part of Christian faith. ‘Christianity, for Kierkegaard’, observes a contemporary theologian, ‘requires the passionate embrace of a paradox in a way of life that confounds the understanding’.<sup>55</sup> Yet perhaps the most important nineteenth-century figure who railed against the narrow scope of Enlightenment rationality was Nietzsche (1844-1900), whose general thrust was oddly parallel to Kierkegaard, although it stemmed from entirely different criteria.

Nietzsche, heavily influenced by Schopenhauer, proposed a significant and direct challenge to classical logic and in particular to the law of non-contradiction. In *The Will to Power* he describes the law as ‘coarse and false’.<sup>56</sup> He states the following: ‘we are unable to affirm and deny one and the same thing: this is a subjective empirical law, not the expression of any ‘necessity’ but only of an inability’.<sup>57</sup> As Michael Green points out, ‘Nietzsche does not argue that the principle of noncontradiction should be abandoned. He does, however, argue that an acceptance of the principle is not demanded by the nature of the world’.<sup>58</sup> Nietzsche provides a profound objection to the ontological validity of the rule of non-contradiction, urging us to recognise that the avoidance of the unity of contraries is a psychological desire and not a universal imperative. At a fundamental level

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid. p. 7.

<sup>55</sup> Matthew C. Bagger, *The Uses of Paradox: Religion, Self-transformation, and the Absurd* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 27.

<sup>56</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche *The Will to Power*, trans. Anthony M. Ludovici, Vol. II (Edinburgh: T. N. Foulis, 1910), p. 32.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>58</sup> Michael Steven Green, *Nietzsche and the Transcendental Tradition* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2002), p. 56.

Nietzschean thought is an attack upon the stability and scope of philosophical reasoning; even the basic components of logical formulae such as subject, object and attribute are not accepted as a ‘metaphysical truth’.<sup>59</sup> Instead, he argues, ‘these distinctions have been made’.<sup>60</sup>

Nietzsche’s description of the artificiality of logic is a close echo of Hamann’s criticism of rational analysis as ‘nothing more than the latest fashionable cut’, and it is in this capacity—as an enemy to the staunch rationalists—that some recent theologians instead of being offended by Nietzschean atheism, have discovered that his work may be used to support their case. Gavin Hyman describes Nietzsche as ‘the last thinker of modernity or the first thinker of postmodernity’,<sup>61</sup> and it is particularly amongst postmodern theologians that Nietzschean thought has been embraced rather than rejected. Among others David Tracy, Graham Ward and David Deane have argued that when Nietzsche announced the death of God, he killed the god of modernity, the deity who ‘could not fit what counted as rational’.<sup>62</sup> By suggesting that human logic is not the ultimate arbiter of truth, postmodern theologians argue that he did not succeed in killing the biblical, pre-modern or Medieval deity; rather, the god that died was an idolatrous god.<sup>63</sup> Thus, even though it would have to await the outworking of modernity, Nietzsche’s work, in spite of its author’s intentions, helped to open the way for something of a recovery of the Thomist and Augustinian ordering of faith and reason, where reason does not exercise superiority over faith. The breakdown of the sovereignty of reason had begun and the circumstances in the latter half of the nineteenth century were ripe for a less rationalistic apologetic.

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<sup>59</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche *The Will to Power*, p. 28.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>61</sup> Gavin Hyman, *A Short History of Atheism*, p. 176.

<sup>62</sup> David Tracy, ‘Fragments: The Spiritual Situation of Our Times’ in *God, the Gift and Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 171.

<sup>63</sup> See Graham Ward’s Introduction to *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell 1997).

It was in this context that figures such as G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936) were prompted to declare with boldness that in certain crucial ways Christian truth departs from what is commonly constituted as rational. ‘While we are being naturalists’ he writes, ‘we can suppose that Christianity is all nonsense; but then, when we remember that we are Christians, we must admit that Christianity is true even if it is nonsense’.<sup>64</sup> Chesterton’s conviction has the potential to disarm the religious cynic who believes that once the illogicalities of faith are pointed out religion loses its credibility. What Chesterton reveals is that the authority of faith does not rest on man’s conception of rationality. This suggestion calls into question the ability of logical descriptions to convey the full reality of the Christian message.

Chesterton is famed for his frequent appeal to paradox. As a result, much of his writing offends those rationalists who hold the law of non-contradiction as unbreakable. Chesterton’s use of the paradoxical is so pervasive that critics have suggested he uses paradox simply to shock his reader, to create humour or to shroud Christianity’s logical flaws in the more romantic trappings of mystery. However, Chesterton declares at the beginning of *Orthodoxy*: ‘I know nothing more contemptible as a mere paradox; a mere ingenious defence of the indefensible’.<sup>65</sup> When he uses paradox he does so because he believes that there are instances in Christian doctrine that cannot accurately be expressed without deviating from the law of non-contradiction. It is not that Chesterton rejected common-sense logic for the sake of it; indeed, he believed that reason is central to theology and tells us an enormous amount about the way the world is. But he emphasised that reason does not tell us everything, and sometimes that which seems quite unreasonable might in fact be a closer representation of the truth.

The wider context in which Chesterton was speaking was a particularly tumultuous time in the history of faith and reason. His sparring partners H. G. Wells and

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<sup>64</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *St Thomas Aquinas*, p. 106.

<sup>65</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, p. 15.

George Bernard Shaw were in many ways representative of mainstream Victorian views, since, following the industrial revolution and the popularisation of German philosophy there had been an explosion of scepticism. And yet, this growth of secularism was juxtaposed with a fervent religious revival across the denominations. Along with Chesterton, one of the central figures preaching the validity of Christianity's seeming 'mass of mad contradictions'<sup>66</sup> was John Henry Newman (1801-1890). His defence in *Grammar of Assent* (completed in 1870) argued that logic did not meet the challenges of real life. 'As to Logic', he wrote, 'its chain of conclusions hangs loose at both ends [...] it comes short both of first principles and of concrete issues'.<sup>67</sup> The significance of Newman's work is that he not only suggested, like Kierkegaard, that faith should not be assessed within the boundaries of logic, but he also attempted to show the shortcomings of secular rationality and how religion, assessed internally, is in fact natural and plausible. This was in part an argument against the law of non-contradiction, since Newman, like Chesterton, exposed paradoxical realities and observed how reason was inadequate to account for such phenomena. 'It is plain', Newman argued, 'that formal logical sequence is not in fact the method by which we are enabled to become certain of what is concrete'.<sup>68</sup> In sum, the Victorian period exhibited a splintering of religious ideas due to the rise and respectability of agnosticism and scepticism, yet it also coincided with a powerful orthodox religious revival. It was in this complex and contested period that Lewis Carroll (1832-1898) lived and wrote.

In the twentieth century, the writings of Darwin and Freud remained central to the attack on faith by reason; secularism became widespread and scientific advancement, no longer hindered by theological authority, gained increased prestige and importance. Science and religion grew further apart and yet, perhaps due to the antagonism of the

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 162.

<sup>67</sup> John Henry Newman, *An Essay in aid of a Grammar of Assent* (New York: The Catholic Publication Society, 1870), p. 272.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 276.



proceeding century, a mood of tolerance arose in certain circles and with it a strong desire for a more pluralist approach to knowledge. Wittgenstein's concept of language games satisfied the concern for a more relativistic assessment of meaning, although this was simultaneously met with opposition by strong evidentialists such as Flew and Clifford, who wanted to assess all claims of faith from the presumption of atheistic values. Ronald Nash explains how according to Clifford '[i]t is always the believer's responsibility to produce reasons or evidence to support his belief'.<sup>69</sup> The effect of this extreme emphasis on verification via empiricism meant that for Clifford, Flew, Ayer and their followers: 'there is never sufficient evidence or proof to support religious belief'.<sup>70</sup>

However, the non-religious world was by no means governed by staunch evidentialism. In fact, alongside the increasing popularisation of logical positivism among philosophers, scientists began to undercut the infallibility of the evidentialist's claim. As certain aspects of theoretical physics became more advanced, greater scepticism accompanied its observations. Heisenberg's uncertainty principle in 1927, along with growing evidence of in support of 'chaos theory', began to throw some doubt on the universal reliability of reason.<sup>71</sup> The twentieth century is therefore very difficult to summarize in terms of a general reaction to issues of faith and reason since alongside evidentialism and verificationism, this period also witnessed the arrival of such things as pluralism, quantum theory, Dadaism and deconstructionism.

The end of the Second World War instigated the meltdown of a whole variety of conventional beliefs and standards. The basic principle of absolutism was railed against in a host of contexts from politics, religion and society to art, morality and science. During the 1960s one of the most significant figures contributing to the deconstruction of

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<sup>69</sup> Ronald H. Nash, *Faith and Reason: Searching for a Rational Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), p. 72.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>71</sup> In 1947 C. S. Lewis in his book *Miracles* makes a similar observation: 'Science itself has already made reality appear less homogenous than we expected it to be: Newtonian atomism was much more the sort of thing we expected (and desired) than Quantum physics'. C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), p. 41.

absolutist ideas was Michel Foucault who challenged historical conceptions of madness and sought to depict unreason in a more positive light. In *Madness and Civilisation* Foucault addresses the historical ‘fear of madness’ and the ‘dread of unreason’.<sup>72</sup> He traces the history of society’s response to cases of madness and insanity, and comes to the conclusion that madness is associated with art and can be understood as a tool or expression by which ‘the world is forced to question itself’.<sup>73</sup> I shall return to this issue in the chapter on anarchy, in which I consider a similar function of nonsense, which, like the madness described by Foucault, has a marginal presence and through it I suggest we are able to reflect critically upon the phenomenal world. Like Foucault I examine the history of folly and observe a close connection between lunacy and wisdom. However, the aspect of Foucault’s work that is most valuable for our present discussion is his recognition of ‘the great theme of the madness of the Cross’.<sup>74</sup>

In *Madness and Civilisation*, perhaps unintentionally, Foucault provides a brief but brilliant Christology of madness. He coins the phrase ‘Christian unreason’<sup>75</sup> and describes how Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky pave the way for its rediscovery following its exile by the militant seventeenth century pursuit of reason. He characterises this period as the wait ‘for Christ to regain the glory of his madness, for scandal to recover its power as revelation, for unreason to cease being merely the public shame of reason’.<sup>76</sup> Foucault’s interest in the value of madness and unreason is indicative of the return to a less empirical-based philosophy that blossomed in second half of the twentieth century. Although Foucault’s focus is primarily socio-historical, his work was nevertheless

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<sup>72</sup> Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilisation*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Tavistock, 1967), p. 211.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 288. ‘Through madness, a work that seems to drown in the world, to reveal there its nonsense, and to transfigure itself with the features of pathology alone, actually engages itself with the world’s time, masters it, and leads it; by the madness which interrupts it, a work of art opens a void, a moment of silence, a question without answer provokes a breach without reconciliation where the world is forced to question itself’.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 79. ‘Christian unreason was relegated by Christians themselves into the margins of a reason that had become identical with the wisdom of God incarnate’.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

significant in the decline of the popularity of logical positivism and the rise of its philosophical nemesis: deconstructionism.

By any account the work of Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) had, and continues to have, a major impact on the fundamental assumptions of Western philosophy. His influence is pervasive and extremely controversial, and although it is possible here to give only a very brief and limited overview of a particular aspect of his work, his importance to current debates on metaphysics can hardly be over-emphasised. Thinkers such as Lyotard, Deleuze, Nancy and Marion are all deeply indebted to Derrida's work, as are whole movements such as postmodernism and post-structuralism.<sup>77</sup> Like Nietzsche before him, Derrida launched an attack on the general application of and strict adherence to the law of non-contradiction. However, before we consider this attack in more detail, it will be helpful to situate this aspect of his thought within the context of his work more generally, which is antagonistic of the wider metaphysical assumptions embedded in the history of Western thought.

It is of course a difficult task to propose a starting point of Derrida's philosophy, given its contestation of origins, but there are several critical components to his theory of deconstruction with which it might be useful to begin. At base, deconstruction criticises the Platonic idea, perpetuated by Western metaphysics, that the essence of a thing is more significant than its appearance, since essence is transcendental and therefore its meaning is fixed and definite. In this sense, both metaphysics and language are *logocentric* and give primacy to the signified over the signifier. What Derrida refers to as 'the absence of the transcendental signified',<sup>78</sup> however, calls into question this monolithic conception of

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<sup>77</sup> The historian Donald Yerxa explains: 'The theoretical origins of postmodernism are primarily located in the post-structuralist philosophy that emerged in France during the latter 1960's and blossomed in the 1970's'. Yerxa lists Foucault and Lacan alongside Derrida as the chief thinkers associated with the movement's genesis. Donald A. Yerxa, *Recent Themes in Historical Conversation* (Columbia: South Carolina University Press, 2008), p. 69.

<sup>78</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (London: John Hopkins University Press, 1998, p. 50.

essence and attempts to destabilise binary oppositions within both metaphysics and language by focussing on the marginal *aporias* of meaning.

Throughout his work, and particularly in ‘Plato’s Pharmacy’ and ‘Dissemination’,<sup>79</sup> Derrida demonstrates how binary oppositions are both arbitrary and unstable and have no fixed transcendental origin.<sup>80</sup> Instability occurs because ‘meaning is nowhere punctually *present* in language [...] it is always subject to a kind of semantic slippage’.<sup>81</sup> In other words, Derrida insists that there is never a perfect unity of signifier and signified. Therefore metaphysical assumptions, which rely upon the stability of meaning, undercut themselves and meaning is set free from the security of transcendental attachment. It is important to note in this connection that the sign in a sense is *self*-deconstructing; Derrida does not approach a text with a set of external maxims that seek to undo the fixed meaning. Rather, Derrida draws attention to an inherent and already existing instability within the system and thereby reveals the radical indeterminacy of its signs.

We are now perhaps in a better position to suggest more specifically how Derrida contributes to the argument against the infallibility of the law of non-contradiction. In order to contain the discussion, I am going to focus on two aspects of his work that specifically require acceptance of a ‘both/and’ logic: the trace and *différance*.<sup>82</sup> When

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<sup>79</sup> Both essays can be found in Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

<sup>80</sup> He begins *Of Grammatology* by announcing ‘the de-sedimentation, the de-construction, of all significations that have their source in that of the logos’. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 11.

<sup>81</sup> Christopher Norris, *Derrida* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 15.

<sup>82</sup> There are of course a variety of other importance instances where Derrida seeks to expose the fallibility of the law of non-contradiction. One such example concerns his commentary on Rousseau in *Of Grammatology*, in which he elaborates on Rousseau’s unification of the contradictory aspects of the process of articulation: ‘He [Rousseau] wishes on the one hand to *affirm*, by giving it a positive value, everything of which articulation is the principle of everything with which it constructs a system (passion, language, society, man, etc.). But he intends to affirm simultaneously all that is cancelled by articulation (accent, life, energy, passion yet again, and so on)’. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, pp. 245-6. The result of this is that Derrida calls for an alternative to the limitations imposed by mainstream logic. ‘It does not suffice to understand Rousseau’s text within the implication of the epochs of metaphysics or of the West’. *Ibid.*, p. 246.

Derrida refers to the ‘trace’ he is indicating ‘an absence that defines a presence’.<sup>83</sup>

Derrida believes every present event contains traces or spectres from the past and anticipations of the future. ‘It is not absence instead of presence’, writes Derrida, ‘but a trace which replaces a presence which has never been present, an origin by means of which nothing has begun’.<sup>84</sup> In other words, every experience is both its own unique event and at the same time present in repeatable future moments and marked by past occurrences. These non-present elements are, according to Derrida, in some real sense present, though marked by an absence—an absence which because it is nonetheless present confuses the law of non-contradiction. Aristotelian logic, by contrast, would maintain that something within an event is either present or absent—hence, there cannot be both presence and non-presence, as is the case with Derrida’s concept of the trace.

*Différance* also defies the law of non-contradiction for Derrida insists on the reality of difference within identity—that is to say, that within the identity of the thing is also contained its difference. In *Aporias* he writes: ‘The identity of a language can only affirm itself as identity to itself by opening itself to the hospitality of a difference from itself or of a difference with itself’.<sup>85</sup> Here, we see how Derrida opposes the Aristotelian insistence on a univocity of meaning by playing with identity and suggesting that there are differences within the same essence. It is important to appreciate that in speaking of *différance* Derrida is not simply opposing univocity with polysemia but suggesting that the singular only exists as a playful movement between multiple identities and that identity even within itself is polysemous.

At this stage we can begin to see how Derrida’s ideas relate to the nonsense literature of Lewis Carroll. The following example from *Alice Through the Looking-Glass* is a helpful clarification of the contrasting logic of *différance*. The White Knight

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<sup>83</sup> John Mullarkey, *Post-Continental Philosophy: An Outline* (New York: Continuum, 2006), p. 228.

<sup>84</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 372

<sup>85</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 10.

tells Alice the name of a song, but Carroll, in a proto-Derridean fashion, facetiously suggests that the identity of a song cannot be fixed by a single signifier:

‘The name of the song is called “*Haddock’s Eyes*.”  
‘Oh, that’s the name of the song, is it?’ Alice said, trying to feel interested.  
‘No, you don’t understand,’ the Knight said, looking a little vexed. ‘That’s what the name *is called*. The name really *is* “*The Aged Aged Man*.”’  
‘Then I ought to have said “That’s what the *song* is called?”’ Alice corrected herself.  
‘No you oughtn’t: that’s quite another thing! The *song* is called “*Ways and Means*”: but that’s only what it’s *called*, you know!’  
‘Well, what *is* the song, then?’ said Alice who was by this time completely bewildered.  
‘I was coming to that,’ the Knight said. ‘The song really *is* “*A-sitting On A Gate*.”’<sup>86</sup>

The extract seems comically to differentiate between: what the song ‘is’; what it is ‘known as’; what it is ‘called’; and what its ‘name’ is called. These proliferating signifiers ‘*Haddock’s Eyes*’, ‘*The Aged Aged Man*’ and so forth are ludicrously divergent, and yet all relate to the identity of the song and so the meaning of the song as a whole appears to be located playfully in the inter-relationship between the perpetually shifting signifiers. As with Derrida’s theory of *différance*, each of these names gestures to a single identity, which thus appears to contain within itself a multiplicity of differences, which in turn suggests that no signifier contains the identity uniquely, ‘*A-Sitting On A Gate*’, for example, does not encapsulate the essence of the song; it is simply another signifier. In this way Carroll, like Derrida, demonstrates that there is no one fixed identity and although Alice keeps attempting to grasp the meaning, the White Knight, playing a Derridean role, presents a playful proliferation of signifiers, which points towards a perpetually receding signified.

Our commentary on Derrida thus far has suggested that he may be an ally to this project to the extent that his ideas contest the universality of the law of non-contradiction. However, it is also clear that Derrida’s relationship to the theological imagination is somewhat hostile. He insisted, for instance, that ‘the age of the sign is essentially

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<sup>86</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*, pp. 186-187

theological',<sup>87</sup> and with the deconstruction of *logocentrism*, in many ways sought the undoing of Christian theology. Yet, despite his ambiguous relationship to the religious, for certain theologians such as John Caputo,<sup>88</sup> Derrida opens the way for the recovery of pre-modern conceptions of the possible by drawing upon the impossible. Caputo states that 'Deconstruction is a passion and a prayer for the impossible, a defense of the impossible against its critics'.<sup>89</sup>

Here we see how Derrida might be of service to religious thinking since the critics against whom Derrida defends the impossible are those who perceive Enlightenment rationality as absolute. Derrida believes that traditional logic limits meaning to the confines of the possible and by doing this makes the articulation of an idea such as hospitality or forgiveness not 'worthy of the name',<sup>90</sup> since forgiveness, logically speaking, can only be applied to that which is forgivable. But for Derrida (and for Christianity) true forgiveness entails forgiveness of the unforgivable or it is not forgiveness at all, hence the only true or possible meaning of forgiveness is impossible. Christ's teaching to 'love your enemy'<sup>91</sup> follows a similar formula; logic dictates that we can only love the loveable, but Christ tells us to love the *unlovable*. This is one of the reasons that Caputo seems justified in stating that 'being impassioned by the impossible, is the religious, is religious passion'.<sup>92</sup>

Whilst Derrida never described himself as a postmodern, his deconstructive ir(religion) has nevertheless been adopted, as we saw with Nietzsche's philosophy, by postmodern theologians as a way of returning to a less secular metaphysic by embracing

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<sup>87</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 14.

<sup>88</sup> For an extensive inquiry into the presence of the religious within Derrida's work see John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

<sup>89</sup> John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, Introduction, p. xx.

<sup>90</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Vol. 1 trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009), p. 309. By contrast, Derrida believes we are required 'to think the *possible* [...] as the *impossible*'. Jacques Derrida, *Paper Machine* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 79.

<sup>91</sup> Matthew 5:44.

<sup>92</sup> John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, Introduction, p. xx.

the collapse of the onto-theological conception of God. Ian Edwards, for example, believes that the ‘boundary-less space’ of unknown possibilities (and impossibilities) is one area where Derrida and theology intersect. Edwards explains: ‘what can happen within a boundary-less space is unlimited. It is here where Derrida finds a kinship with negative theology. Both deconstruction and negative theology [...] attempt to assert what cannot be asserted’.<sup>93</sup> Of course we cannot simply assume that when Derrida unsettles certain delimitations imposed by reason this is automatically of value to faith. Yet, in a sense, Derrida provides a negative warrant for the present thesis by exploring and vindicating a territory beyond the conclusions of classical logic, which as we have seen throughout this introduction are often at odds with Christian beliefs. The particular merit of Derrida’s thought is that from a non-religious perspective he fulminates against the same foe as St Paul, Denys, the Medieval mystics, Luther, Kierkegaard and the other propagators of truth claims that carry us the other side of reason.

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<sup>93</sup> Ian Edwards, ‘Derrida’s Ir(religion): A Theology of Différance’ *Janus Head* 6:1 (Spring 2003), pp. 142-153 (p. 144). It is of course important to recognise that whilst différance and apophaticism share similar passions there are, nevertheless, significantly distinct from each other. Caputo himself acknowledges this in the outline of an exchange following Derrida’s presentation of his paper ‘Différance’. One listener criticised Derrida stating: ‘It [différance] is the source of everything and one cannot know it: it is the God of negative theology’. Derrida’s answer was simply “It is and it is not”. John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, p. 2.



## Contemporary Cognate Projects

It will be helpful to conclude our brief history of the dialogue between faith and reason with a discussion of the various cognate contemporary projects, in order to determine to what extent the current thesis relates to or is distinct from adjacent and overlapping work in recent research. Mark Taylor's 'a/theology' is an early response to Derrida's thought and significant for our study since he uses postmodern philosophy to draw out and comment on what he sees as marginalized and subversive aspects of Christianity. Like the current project, Taylor begins his deconstructive theology by charting the history of Enlightenment thought and in particular observes how the Enlightenment brought about 'the renewed confidence in human reason'.<sup>94</sup> The manner in which this is highlighted suggests that the author is interested in deviating from the rational security of the Enlightenment, and indeed fairly swiftly Taylor emphasises that his a/theology will 'invert established meaning and subvert everything once deemed holy. It will thus be utterly transgressive'.<sup>95</sup>

With this agenda it is possible to see how Derrida's thought could be of great value to Taylor's work, since Derrida likewise approaches Christianity with the intention of deconstructing its established meaning. Taylor observes how 'it is just this antithetical association with theology that lends deconstruction its "religious" significance for marginal thinkers'.<sup>96</sup> However, for our investigation, whilst we can appreciate that an attempt to discuss religion through the principles of nonsense may seem like a similarly transgressive endeavour, the aim of this thesis is paradoxically to reveal the truly conservative core of such 'transgressive' theology. Thus, although this project is in many ways assisted by Taylor's creative and counter-intuitive theology, I want to question

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<sup>94</sup> Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 3.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

whether his programmatically ‘errant’ theologizing doesn’t end up creating its own boundaries, and ask if one can be both marginal and orthodox at the same time.

The philosophy of Gilles Deleuze provides a revolutionary approach to metaphysics, exploring significant correlative trajectories such as the commonplace acceptance of Aristotelian and Husserlian logic. In particular, his book *The Logic of Sense* contains strikingly adjacent material to this project since he uses nonsense literature as a way of interacting with ontological concerns. What is especially interesting is that from a position of atheism Deleuze sees a need to speak of nonsense in order to describe reality. As with Nietzsche and Derrida, we find in Deleuze the suggestion that atheism is not coextensive with rationality, and that to speak truly of that which is one must be prepared at a certain point to let go of logic.

Obviously, a comprehensive discussion of Deleuzian philosophy is beyond the scope of this introduction. However, an indication of his views on the subject of sense and nonsense will help to contextualize our concerns. There is an on-going attempt within Deleuze’s work to undo Russell and Frege’s assumption that truth and sense are necessarily conjoined and that sense provides a firm veridical basis. In *The Logic of Sense* Deleuze seeks to demonstrate the instability of sense and its co-presence with nonsense.<sup>97</sup> He suggests that sense is not its own origin, but is a product of various non-sensical components, claiming that sense is merely one type of effect produced at random out of the metaphysical flux of meaning and is thus connected and stabilised by nonsense. ‘Reason is always a region carved out of the irrational’, writes Deleuze, ‘not sheltered from the irrational at all, but traversed by it and only defined by a particular kind of relationship among irrational factors. Underneath all reason lies delirium, and drift’.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> For a further discussion on this theme see Marnie Parsons, *Touch monkeys: Nonsense Strategies for Reading Twentieth-Century Poetry* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1994). She describes how for Deleuze ‘sense is co-present with nonsense’, p. 20.

<sup>98</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Desert Islands and Other Texts, 1953-1974*, trans. Michael Taormina (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004), p. 262.

Deleuze turns our basic conception of sense upside-down, implying that the very foundation of sense is nonsense.<sup>99</sup> This intimate connection between sense and nonsense is effectively a disturbance of the law of non-contradiction and the erection of a paradoxical ontology in its place. Oliver Davies comes to a similar conclusion, believing ‘Deleuze is thus able to offer a critique of the Western metaphysical tradition as a system of thinking’.<sup>100</sup> Jean-Jacques Lecercle likewise identifies ‘the Deleuzian logic of unholy mixtures, an AND rather than an INSTEAD OF logic’,<sup>101</sup> and it is this characteristic that is of obvious relevance to our concerns since it is a further demonstration that the inherited laws of logic do not necessarily hold in every circumstance, even before we say a word about God.

Since his philosophy is launched from a position of atheism it unwittingly gives credence to the similar theological questioning of principles of Western logic. Deleuze’s own attempt at disarming staunch rationalism and scientism assists a religious endeavour to do the same. ‘What I’m interested in’, he writes, ‘are the relations between the arts, science and philosophy. There’s no order of priority among these disciplines. Each is creative’.<sup>102</sup> Perhaps the ultimate significance of Deleuze for this thesis is that, like Schopenhauer, he attempts to show that the status of sense is not as secure as is often assumed, and that any accurate evaluation of reality must begin by calling this status into question.

Postmodern theology, as we have seen, shares many of Deleuze’s central objectives and within this field the status of sense and logic is unashamedly called into question. John Caputo and Michael Scanlon amongst others have mounted an explicitly

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<sup>99</sup> Lawlor comments on Deleuze’s phrase: ‘the foundation can never resemble what it founds’ and explains: ‘This Deleuzian principle, which is perhaps *the* defining principle of all of Deleuze’s philosophy implies that the foundation of sense is nonsense’. Leonard Lawlor, *Thinking Through French Philosophy: The Being of the Question* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2003), p. 132.

<sup>100</sup> Oliver Davies, ‘Thinking Difference: A comparative Study of Gilles Deleuze, Plotinus and Meister Eckhart’ in *Deleuze and Religion*, (ed.) Mary Bryden (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 76.

<sup>101</sup> Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *Deleuze and Language* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 53-54.

<sup>102</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations 1972-1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 123.

theological inquiry into the value of unreason. They associate secularization with modernity and see a desecularized return to religious thinking as a product of postmodern, deconstructive theory. There have been significant recent advances in the theological recognition of the value of the non-commonsensual, or to use the language of Caputo and Scanlon, ‘of what the ‘old enlightenment’ declared impossible’.<sup>103</sup> They look to the ‘new enlightenment [...] which is given over to dreaming of the *impossible*’.<sup>104</sup> Caputo and Scanlon’s objective seems to be an important step in retrieving a pre-modern balance of the mystical with the evidential by allowing for the experience of ‘impossible’ ideas that cannot be interacted with on a purely rational level. That is not to say that the rational is wrong—this project does not call for the usurpation of reason, but seeks to give space to or to share court with alternative methods of theorizing. To this extent the task before us is properly postmodern in that it is not a rejection of reason, but the denial of reason’s universality. Vanhoozer summarises this idea by explaining ‘[i]t is not that postmoderns are irrational, they do not reject “reason” but “Reason”’.<sup>105</sup>

In *After the Death of God*, Caputo associates the Kingdom of God with paradox, anarchy and Lewis Carroll, all of which play a major part in the current thesis. Although it is only a brief reference, mainly in response to Deleuze’s *Logic of Sense*, Caputo writes: ‘the divine madness of the Kingdom of God described in the New Testament, where the event provokes the most sublime effects, a veritable “sacred anarchy,” whose parables and paradoxes are easily the match of any of the tales told by Lewis Carroll’.<sup>106</sup> Here Caputo encourages in his reader the idea that the Kingdom of God might have some analogous connection to Lewis Carroll’s nonsense worlds. Although Caputo does not devote any time to exploring what is specifically entailed by this analogy, it is

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<sup>103</sup> Caputo and Scanlon, *God, the Gift and Postmodernism*, p. 3.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ‘Theology and the Condition of Postmodernity’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 10.

<sup>106</sup> John D. Caputo, *After the Death of God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 60.

nevertheless useful to discover such a close connection to this project within recent theological thought.

Though less well known in theological circles, the concept of ‘dialetheism’ is an important parallel development in the field of analytical philosophy that closely corresponds to the breakdown of the certainty of the law of non-contradiction. Given the context of its emergence, it offers perhaps the most surprising challenge to the laws of classical reason, and in particular to the principle of non-contradiction. Dialethesism [literally *di aletheia* (two truths)]—which was coined by Graham Priest and Richard Routley in 1981—refers to the possibility that certain logically contradictory statements are accurate descriptions of reality, or as Priest himself summarises: ‘The view that the LNC [law of non-contradiction] fails, that some contradictions are true is called *dialetheism*’.<sup>107</sup>

What was in the 1980s an obscure and somewhat far-out suggestion has now gained widespread support and respect among many leading logicians. Michael Resnik, for example, introduces dialetheism thus: ‘For centuries logicians have held that contradictions cannot be true. This has been a fundamental principle of every system of logic capable of expressing it or a reasonable approximation thereof [...] But today, thanks to forceful and astute criticisms by the dialetheists, we can no longer take this dogma for granted’.<sup>108</sup> Briefly, dialetheism takes its cue from ‘paraconsistent logics’,<sup>109</sup> a philosophical method of determining statement veracity that allows for inconsistency-tolerant conditions and is able to support a sentence whose negation and affirmation both hold true.<sup>110</sup> The significance of the dialetheist’s challenge to the dialogue between faith

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<sup>107</sup> Graham Priest ‘What’s so bad about contradictions?’ in *The Law of Non-Contradiction*, p. 29.

<sup>108</sup> Michael D. Resnik ‘Revising Logic’ in *The Law of Non-Contradiction*, p. 178.

<sup>109</sup> The term was first used in 1976 by Francisco Miro Quesada.

<sup>110</sup> There are two main strands of dialetheism: Semantic and Metaphysical. Semantic Dialetheism maintains that contradictions result from the gap between language and the actuality of the world it tries to describe, whereas Metaphysical Dialetheism believes that the intrinsic property of certain things or circumstances are of necessity contradictory. For a further explanation see Edwin D. Mares’ chapter ‘Semantic Dialetheism’ in *The Law of Non-Contradiction*.

and reason is that dialetheism comes from within the analytical tradition known for its harsh criticism of religious statements for failing to conform to the standards of Western metaphysics and, like postmodernism, shows these standards to be less stable than is commonly assumed.

Perhaps, therefore, it is surprising that dialetheism is seldom included in theological discourse.<sup>111</sup> James Anderson mentions the concept in his treatise on religious paradox, but discounts its relevance, claiming ‘dialethesim only saves rationality at the expense of trivializing orthodoxy’.<sup>112</sup> However, it is worth paying attention to the objective of Anderson’s argument, which is to support religious paradox and yet ‘avoid denying or revising the law of non-contradiction or any other classical rules of logic’.<sup>113</sup> He believes firmly that ‘the more exalted the epistemic status of Christian doctrine, the better equipped it will be to deal with epistemic challenges such as those raised by the problem of paradox’.<sup>114</sup> Yet, as we have seen, the laws of classical epistemology are themselves being called into question by logicians, and in many circles adherence to the laws of reason is no longer considered a necessary measurement of intellectual rectitude. The diversity of thinkers involved in the challenge to the imperial reign of reason seems to demonstrate that the opposition is not simply a distortion serving the particular agenda of one ideology, but an important objection to heed. As we have seen, the history of protest belongs not only to advocates of deconstruction or nihilism, as one might anticipate, but also to analytical philosophers and orthodox theologians.

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<sup>111</sup> Although it is only an isolated footnote to the main treatise, Earl Stanley B. Fronda, in *Wittgenstein’s (Misunderstood) Religious Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 2010) identifies a point of sympathetic unity between Dialethism and theology: ‘One may then suppose that the logic underpinning the Pseudo-Dionysian discourse may be better accounted by non-classical logics such as *dialetheism*. Its development is motivated by the realization that certain contradictions are true. While the motivations that led to the development of these logics differ, they intersect at certain points, the most noteworthy of which is their rejection of the absolute applicability of the law of non-contradiction; there are, they hold, some contradictions [...] that are true [...] he [Graham Priest] argues that the law of non-contradiction is an Aristotelian dogma that can and should be challenged—an attitude reminiscent of Nicholas of Cusa’, p. 5, n. 24.

<sup>112</sup> James Anderson, *Paradox in Christian Theology*, p. 126.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 219.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.

It might be assumed, given the current postmodern dissatisfaction with inherited conceptions of the possible, theologians would be more amenable to this movement as a deliverance from the imposition of non-religious standards of reason, and indeed we have witnessed some significant research into this area. Yet some of the strongest arguments in support of Aristotelian logic still come from within the field of theology, where rationality is often given ontological significance. This idea underlies Nicholas Wolterstorff's dictum: 'When the theist believes nonrationally, he acts in violation of the will of the very God in whom he believes'.<sup>115</sup> Many theologians firmly uphold the principles of Western metaphysics and formulate their apologetics in accordance with these rules. Geisler and Brooks, for example, maintain that 'if logic is a necessary precondition of all thought, then it must also be necessary for all thought about God'.<sup>116</sup> Despite the many attempts to show that logic is not a *necessary* precondition of all thought, the persistence of Enlightenment assumptions remains dominant in contemporary Christian theology, even though the resurrection it affirms is an empirical impossibility.

A defence of religion reliant upon tenets of logical reasoning assumes that if theological precepts can be articulated in accordance with logic then religious belief can be insulated from rational repudiation.<sup>117</sup> Logicians, however, rarely hold this view, and should they interact with theology at all will frequently use logic as a means by which they *disparage* religious belief. Anthony Kenny in his lecture series *Faith and Reason* typifies this view: 'I conclude, then, my inquiry into the rationality of faith with the conclusion that faith is not, as theologians have claimed, a virtue, but a vice, unless a

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<sup>115</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff 'Can Belief in God be Rational?' in Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, (eds.) *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), p. 156.

<sup>116</sup> Norman L. Geisler and Ronald M. Brooks, (eds.) *Come, Let Us Reason: An Introduction to Logical Thinking* (Ada, Michigan: Baker Book House Company, 1990), p. 16.

<sup>117</sup> As one author demonstrates: 'Whether in a discussion between Christians on a matter of interpretation or in a debate with a non-Christian, no one could prove any point without the laws of rational inference. These tools of the theologian are all kept in the logician's toolbox'. Geisler and Brooks, *Come, Let Us Reason*, p. 16.

number of conditions can be fulfilled. One of them is that the existence of God can be rationally justified outside faith'.<sup>118</sup>

This reliance on logic as the arbiter of veracity has led certain thinkers, such as D. Z. Phillips, to seek to relocate theological inquiry outside of the type of foundational rationalism that Kenny insists is compulsory for belief. Phillips describes his dissatisfaction with the 'post-Enlightenment conception of rationality and its notion of sovereign reason' as a 'philosophical scandal'.<sup>119</sup> 'We are asked to accept', Phillips complains, 'as the only appropriate philosophical method for establishing the rationality of religious belief, a method which actually distorts the character of religious belief'.<sup>120</sup> We are thus faced with a radical and seemingly incompatible divergence among theologians. On the one hand we are urged to uphold a logical account of faith, a 'rational belief', one 'which does not violate our noetic obligations'.<sup>121</sup> On the other hand, theologians seem to be celebrating religion as 'the unassimilable other of Enlightenment modernity'.<sup>122</sup> We find ourselves forced into a perplexing dichotomy: Christian faith, it seems, is either supremely rational *or* it transcends all rational inquiry.

This is in many ways an unhelpful dichotomy and some theologians have recognised the inadequacy of this either/or approach, calling for an encounter that has a more paradoxical flavour, allowing for a richer combination of reason with its antithesis. Prompted by a dialogue between Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, in which both express a certain desire to 'go beyond the impoverished Enlightenment view of reason',<sup>123</sup> Creston Davis acknowledges the need for theology to avoid creating a dichotomy between rationality and faith: 'the return to the theological in our time', Davis writes, 'may be a

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<sup>118</sup> Anthony Kenny, *Faith and Reason* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 84.

<sup>119</sup> D. Z. Phillips, *Faith After Foundationalism* (London: Routledge, 1988), Introduction, xiii.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>121</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff 'Can Belief in God be Rational?' in *Faith and Rationality*, p. 144.

<sup>122</sup> David Tracy *God*, 'Fragments: The Spiritual Situation of Our Times' in *God, the Gift and Postmodernism*, p. 171.

<sup>123</sup> Creston Davis, Introduction to Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, (ed.) Creston Davis (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2009), p. 10.



call, once again, to strike a balance between reason and myth, between belief and faith [...] and between the divine and the human'.<sup>124</sup> One way to accomplish this is to synthesize faith with rationality as we have seen in Anderson's treatise.<sup>125</sup> An alternative method, however, would be to re-evaluate the status of the irrational, and rather than trying to circumvent or explain away moments of logical conflict within theology, one might instead countenance the theological validity of unreason.

This does not seem to be an approach that has been significantly explored. George Mavrodes, for example, in response to the atheist's objection to faith on the grounds of irrationality suggests there are 'three alternatives by way of setting the record straight'. He explains: 'we could simply assert that the faith is rational, or we could produce a positive argument in support of its rationality, or we could undertake to refute the atheist's argument'.<sup>126</sup> Mavrodes doesn't mention a fourth alternative, however, which this thesis proposes—and that is to agree with the atheist, but to transvaluate the language of unreason by demonstrating its ability to describe the nature of that which is. Indeed, it will be a central part of the argument of this thesis that there are certain aspects of reality which are best described by means of 'nonsense'.

On the whole, terms such as 'irrational', 'absurd' and 'nonsense' still belong to the sceptic, and form part of his arsenal. Such descriptors are rarely accepted or favoured by religious believers, and perhaps with good reason. Within the symbolism of philosophical logic, Neil Tennant explains '⊥ is, logically, as horrific a conclusion as one can possibly get. Indeed, ⊥ is *so* bad that, funnily enough, nothing *can* really follow from it the way the absurdity rule would otherwise maintain. ⊥ is like a logical black hole: no

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>125</sup> Anderson creates a model for understanding theological paradox which he calls 'RAPT'—Rational Affirmation of Paradoxical Theology, 'according to which Christians can be entirely rational in believing certain apparently contradictory doctrines'. James Anderson, *Paradox in Christian Theology*, p. 218.

<sup>126</sup> George I. Mavrodes 'Jerusalem and Athens Revisited' in *Faith and Rationality*, p. 204.

possible thought that makes any sense could ever escape from it'.<sup>127</sup> This thesis is concerned with whether there are any moments within orthodox Christian teaching which lead to the conclusion  $\perp$ , and if so, whether this makes such claims redundant, or if, on the other hand, absurdity might in some sense itself be a revelation of truth.

The history of faith and reason that we have sketched indicates that our normative ways of discerning reality are structured by the principles of logic. This manner of perceiving the world is both instructive and necessary, but, as we have seen, at the same time it also prejudices, leaves out and discounts what has become the other of logical discourse—the a-linear and the nonsensical. Since our intention is to explore the theological value of these alternative ways of interacting with and regarding the structure of reality, we will use nonsense literature as a point of comparison with the religious imagination. In Part Two of the thesis I will go into more detail about the strengths and weaknesses of this association, but for now I want briefly to introduce the idea that an artistic endeavour such as nonsense literature is in itself a kind of theology.

Some forms of art explicitly invoke the divine such as stained glass windows, church music or religious poetry and one can easily appreciate the theological value of this type of artistic creativity. Yet art *per se* does not appear to have inherent religious relevance—for example it might seem far-fetched to look for the theology in punk music, tap dancing, or comic strips, and Lewis Carroll's nonsense stories certainly fit into this category. However, Richard Viladesau has suggested that all art can be read as a text of theology. He writes: 'art itself, precisely as art, can be seen as a mode of reflection on and embodiment of Christian ideas and values and, hence, as constituting a form of theology'.<sup>128</sup> The concept behind Viladesau's belief is twofold; firstly, all art is

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<sup>127</sup> Neil Tennant 'An Anti-Realist Critique of Dialetheism' in *The Law of Non-Contradiction*, p. 358. [ $\perp$  is the logical symbol representing absurd or absurdism.]

<sup>128</sup> Richard Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts: Encountering God Through Music, Art, and Rhetoric* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2000), p. 124.

theological because it is creative, it reflects God's own creativity and utilises our God-given capacity to design and construct. In some sense, then, the basic status of art as the representation of the creative imagination, contains within it more complex realities, and is itself a move beyond reason and logic into some other state.

Secondly, according to Viladesau '[a]rt reveals significant aspects of the particular human situations to which God's word is addressed and on which theology must therefore reflect if it is to be relevant'.<sup>129</sup> This second reason indicates that art can have a practical role in communicating the Christian message since it creates the link between the life of an individual and the teachings of the Church. Art can become a bridge by which we can meet God in a way that is unique and apposite to us. Michael Ward, commenting on the use of fantasy literature as a method of religious teaching, writes: 'As an apologetic strategy, it only makes sense to meet people where they are. Where else, indeed can they be met?'<sup>130</sup> Ward's statement helps to indicate why exploring theology through nonsense literature could be a valuable pursuit; it allows us to begin by listening to the sceptic and ask if some measure of irrational credulity is required in order to accept Christian faith. Using nonsense literature as a means of exploring theology thus goes some way in addressing the sceptic's perennial refrain: 'you can't seriously *believe* it!'<sup>131</sup> This project is not in any way set up to discredit the innumerable, vital rational defenses of Christianity, but to seek a restoration of the Pauline balance of reason with a delight in unreason and wisdom with a reverence for folly.

There are of course many questions to ask and qualifications to be made, but at this initial stage, in the view of secular misgivings about the laws of human reason, there

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Michael Ward, 'The Good Serves the Better and Both the Best: C. S. Lewis on Imagination and Reason in Apologetics' in *Imaginative Apologetics: Theology, Philosophy and the Catholic Tradition*, (ed.) Andrew Davidson (London: SCM Press, 2011), p. 68.

<sup>131</sup> A phrase used by the character Charles Ryder inquiring into his friend's Catholic faith in *Brideshead Revisited*. Charles begins this discussion by saying: 'I suppose they try and make you believe an awful lot of nonsense'. Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited* (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), p. 84.

seems to be a warrant to explore the possibility that moments of logical discord within Christian theology are not necessarily adequate grounds for dismissal. Certainly Stenson means to discredit Christianity when he suggests that ‘if [...] no theist can give satisfactory criteria for establishing the truth or falsity of such statements even in principle (let alone practice), then these expressions must be like Lewis Carroll’s nonsense verses, statements which seem to be genuine assertions, but which, like the Jabberwock poem, have no cognitive significance at all’.<sup>132</sup> The question posed by the current thesis, however, is: what implication might it have for theology if we accepted the analogy Stenson makes with nonsense, but disputed the assumption that it has ‘no cognitive significance’?

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<sup>132</sup> Sten H. Stenson, *Sense and Nonsense in Religion: An essay on the Language and Phenomenology of Religion* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969), p. 19.

PART I:

CHRISTIAN UNREASON

## **Chapter One: Paradox**

### **i) Nonsense and Paradox**

The history of faith and reason summarily sketched recognizes that our customary ways of discerning reality are structured by the principles of logic. This manner of perceiving the world is obviously appropriate—and our normative posture—and I do not at all wish to deny its value or our fundamental need of it. However, it is also clear from the previous section that for many thinkers this approach doesn't exhaust, and sometimes distorts, the nature of that which is. This thesis will therefore consider a range of a-rational ways of describing reality, not as an *alternative* to the exercise of reason, but in an attempt to preserve or retrieve what Enlightenment approaches often leave out or obscure.

Having found from our survey that logic does not always lead to an accurate description of reality, I intend to experiment with the nonsensical to see whether in worlds such as Lewis Carroll's Wonderland a faithful apprehension of the real may paradoxically be achieved by recourse to the surreal or anti-real. I begin by simply seeking to define the character of the nonsensical imagination, which will involve exploring central structural devices of nonsense fiction which require imaginative participation on the reader's behalf. Since this project is concerned with a religious worldview, these key descriptors will then be brought into dialogue with Christian faith. In creating a connection between faith and nonsense it is important to conduct the study by commencing with nonsense rather than theology in order to demonstrate that our main areas of examination are genuinely significant features of the nonsensical imagination and not merely one-off instances that happen to be suggestive of theological maxims.

Alongside the nonsense stories of Lewis Carroll I will draw these central characteristics from a variety of nonsense theorists. Perhaps the three most important

commentators on literary nonsense are: Elizabeth Sewell (1952), Wim Tigges (1986), and Jean-Jacques Lecercle (1994). Having already established the law of non-contradiction as a foundational precept of common-sense logic, I want to suggest that perhaps the most conspicuous contravention of this principle is the idea of paradox—a contradiction that is true. The idea that paradox is a consistent and important dimension of nonsense literature is recognised by Sewell as the ‘the game of nonsense’, which she describes as ‘the mind’s employing its tendency towards order to engage its contrary tendency towards disorder’.<sup>1</sup> Tigges defines literary nonsense as ‘a genre of narrative literature which balances a multiplicity of meaning with a simultaneous absence of meaning’.<sup>2</sup> And Lecercle argues ‘the genre is structured by the contradiction [...] in terms of a dialectic, between over-structuring and de-structuring, subversion and support’.<sup>3</sup> Each of these thinkers insists upon the presence of contradiction and dialectic as fundamental to literary nonsense.<sup>4</sup>

Paradox is a central feature of Lewis Carroll’s fictional worlds. Peter Heath in *The Philosopher’s Alice* provides excellent commentary on the logical inconsistencies of Wonderland. Referring to the absurd Caucus race in which the Dodo declares: ‘Everybody has won, and *all* must have prizes’,<sup>5</sup> Heath describes this as a paradox in breach of the law of non-contradiction since ‘winning logically entails that some contestants do better than others’.<sup>6</sup> Either somebody has won *or* they have all drawn; the contestants cannot both draw and not draw as the Dodo proposes. Cases, then, where the law of non-contradiction appears to be breached will be accepted as instances of nonsensical paradox. It may be helpful, however, to distinguish three separate types of paradox in which the majority of all nonsense contradictions find root: paradoxes of

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Sewell, *The Field of Nonsense* (London: Chetto and Windus, 1952), p. 48.

<sup>2</sup> Wim Tigges, *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1988), p. 47.

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *A Philosophy of Nonsense* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Stewart, although lesser known, has an important treatise on nonsense: *Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature* (Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979). In her work she also refers to paradox as a central characteristic of literary nonsense; she writes: ‘the social use of nonsense is paradoxical; nonsense presents the uncategorizable category, the context that cannot be contextualized’. p. 207.

<sup>5</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, (ed.) Donald Grey (London: Norton, 1992), p. 23.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Heath, *The Philosopher’s Alice* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1974), p. 32.

speech; paradoxes of sense; and paradoxes of time. I will begin with a summary of the paradox of speech.

The first type—linguistic paradox—involves an apparent contradiction, which is utilized to comic effect by nonsense writers. Lecercle summarizes it as follows: ‘I speak language, in other words I am master of the instrument which allows me to communicate with others, and yet it is a language that speaks: I am constrained by the language I inhabit to such an extent that I am inhabited or possessed by it’.<sup>7</sup> Carroll delighted in this linguistic paradox, and a prominent cause of nonsensical wit in the *Alice* books centres around the problem that words aren’t entirely in our control and often fail to convey what the speaker means.

Through the character of Humpty Dumpty, Carroll demonstrates the resultant nonsense of attempting to avoid encountering the paradox of speech. In the following well-known extract Alice tries to engage sensibly in Humpty Dumpty’s absurd reasoning, which results in her complete bewilderment:

‘When *I* use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.’

‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.’

‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master—that’s all.’

Alice was too puzzled to say anything; so after a minute Humpty Dumpty began again. ‘They’ve a temper, some of them—particularly verbs: they’re the proudest—adjectives you can do anything with, but not verbs—however, *I* can manage the whole lot of them! Impenetrability! That’s what *I* say!’

‘Would you tell me, please,’ said Alice, ‘what that means?’

‘Now you talk like a reasonable child,’ said Humpty Dumpty, looking very much pleased. ‘I meant by “impenetrability” that we’ve had enough of that subject, and it would be just as well if you’d mention what you mean to do next, as I suppose you don’t mean to stop here all the rest of your life’.<sup>8</sup>

This exchange seems to suggest, contrary to Humpty Dumpty’s approach, that true mastery of language involves relinquishing the desire for total control over meaning.

Effective communication seems to have to acknowledge the imprecision of language but speaks as if it were precise. To use the formula of non-contradiction, this paradox reveals

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<sup>7</sup> Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *Philosophy of Nonsense*, p. 25.

<sup>8</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*, pp. 162-3.



that in one sentence an individual can both say and not say precisely what he intends. In everyday use, this is for the most part a dormant paradox; we tend to know what is meant even if the words are approximate. However, as Derrida insists, language is capable of saying ‘more, less, or something other than what [we] mean’,<sup>9</sup> and this is what the nonsense author brings gently and playfully into view, provoking the reader to recognise the subversive and ungovernable feature of his own speech.

The second main type of nonsense paradox involves the co-dependency of nonsense and sense, an idea particularly associated with Deleuze. In the introduction to *The Logic of Sense* he outlines why paradox is intricately linked to a discussion of both sense and nonsense: ‘we present here a series of paradoxes which form the theory of sense. It is easy to explain why this theory is inseparable from paradoxes: sense is a nonexisting entity, and, in fact, maintains very special relations with nonsense’.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps we should not be surprised at this feature of the *Alice* narratives, given Carroll’s strange dual life as an Oxford logician and nonsense writer. Good nonsense, it seems, is reliant upon strict sense. In fact, it is Carroll’s brilliant logic that gives birth to some of his most ingenious moments of nonsense. Lecercle observes a similar phenomenon: ‘Lack of sense here is always compensated by excess or proliferation of sense there. This [...] is the central paradox or contradiction of the genre’.<sup>11</sup> It is paradoxical because one would anticipate that the more strictly one adheres to sense, the more it should correspond to sound reason, yet as literary nonsense reveals, it is sometimes the very strictness of the adherence to logic that results in absurdity. As the following dialogue demonstrates, much of the Hare and Hatter’s nonsense is derived from their pedantic demand for clarity.

‘I’m glad they’ve begun asking riddles.—I believe I can guess that,’ she added aloud.

‘Do you mean that you think you can find out the answer to it?’ said the March Hare.

‘Exactly so,’ said Alice.

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<sup>9</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 158.

<sup>10</sup> Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, Introduction, ix.

<sup>11</sup> Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *Philosophy of Nonsense*, p. 31.

‘Then you should say what you mean,’ the March Hare went on.  
 ‘I do,’ Alice hastily replied; ‘at least—at least I mean what I say—that’s the same thing, you know.’  
 ‘Not the same thing a bit!’ said the Hatter. ‘You might just as well say that “I see what I eat” is the same thing as “I eat what I see”!’<sup>12</sup>

G. K. Chesterton in *Orthodoxy* dedicates a chapter to ‘The Maniac’, whom he describes as possessing ‘the combination of an expansive and exhaustive reason with a contracted common sense’.<sup>13</sup> This indeed seems to be an accurate description of the Hare and Hatter in their conversation with Alice, as they demonstrate a sort of unreasonable logic in exhibiting a concern for precision that is out of all proportion; indeed, we might say they have lost everything *except* their reason. The law of non-contradiction tells us that if something is fully irrational it cannot also be rational, but as we have seen it is not the Hare and Hatter’s irrationality but their strict rationality that renders their dialogue nonsensical.

Such nonsense reveals to us that in everyday communication sense and nonsense flow into one another and that the staunchest sense touches the strictest nonsense. What we take to be ‘sensible’ Carroll reveals to be the happy balance of sense and nonsense, as opposed to strict reason, which often results in absurdity. Such an example can be found in the ludicrous judicial system of Looking-Glass land. As Alice admits, there is nothing exactly at fault with the Queen’s logic, and yet the conclusion is supremely unreasonable:

‘There’s the King’s Messenger. He’s in prison now, being punished: and the trial doesn’t even begin till next Wednesday: and of course the crime comes last of all.’  
 ‘Suppose he never commits the crime?’ said Alice.  
 ‘That would be all the better, wouldn’t it?’ the Queen said  
 [...] Alice felt there was no denying *that*. ‘Of course it would be all the better,’ she said: ‘but it wouldn’t be all the better his being punished.’  
 ‘You’re wrong *there*, at any rate,’ said the Queen. ‘Were *you* ever punished?’  
 ‘Only for faults,’ said Alice.  
 ‘And you were all the better for it, I know!’ the Queen said triumphantly.  
 ‘Yes, but then I *had* done the things I was punished for,’ said Alice: ‘that makes all the difference.’  
 ‘But if you *hadn’t* done them,’ the Queen said, ‘that would have been better still’.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, p. 55.

<sup>13</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1927), p. 36.

<sup>14</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*, p. 151.

The steps of the Queen's argument are perfectly legitimate but the contention is still irrational; it is all sense and no meaning. Nonsense logic, as we can see here, often produces a perversion of sense via a perfection of reason and it is this second type of paradox that creates much literary nonsense wit.

The third type of paradox dominant in nonsense literature concerns time. Susan Stewart in *Aspects of Intertextuality* describes how literary nonsense 'stands in direct contradiction to the remaining three laws of Husserl's "lived experiences of time"'. These include: 'That different times can never be conjoint; that their relation is a nonsimultaneous one; and that there is transitivity, that to every time belongs an earlier and a later'.<sup>15</sup> It is easy to find a multitude of nonsense examples that flout Husserl's laws and give way to paradoxical expressions of temporality. In Carroll's worlds, several days come at once;<sup>16</sup> time can stand still for a few individuals whilst speeding up for others;<sup>17</sup> and the ordinary sequence of events is distorted so that future events can take place in the past or present.<sup>18</sup>

The three different types of paradoxes identified testify to the extensiveness of Carroll's usage of contrary logic. His paradoxes are temporal and also spatial; they are concerned with reason and speech, personal identity and imaginary objects; they are physical, literal, moral and metaphysical. Alice is herself even described as possessing a paradoxical character, according to Nina Auerbach, who ascribes to her opposing roles:

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<sup>15</sup> Susan Stewart in *Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature*, p. 146.

<sup>16</sup> 'Alice was puzzled. "In *our* country," she remarked, "there's only one day at a time." The Red Queen said "That's a poor thin way of doing things. Now *here*, we mostly have days and nights two or three at a time, and sometimes in the winter we take as many as five nights together—for warmth you know.'" Lewis Carroll, *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*, p. 195.

<sup>17</sup> 'Now if you kept on good terms with him, [time] he'd do almost anything you liked with the clock. For instance, suppose it were nine o'clock in the morning, just time to begin lessons: you'd only have to whisper a hint to Time, and round goes the clock in a twinkling!' *Alice in Wonderland*, p. 56. This appears in contrast with the Hatter's experience of reality: 'He [time] wo'n't do a thing I ask! It's always six o'clock now'. *Alice in Wonderland*, p. 58.

<sup>18</sup> "'Living backwards!' Alice repeated in great astonishment. "I never heard of such a thing!" "—but there's one great advantage in it, that one's memory works both ways."

"I'm sure *mine* only works one way," Alice remarked. "I can't remember things before they happen." The Queen then tells Alice that her clearest memories are "things that happened the week after next." Lewis Carroll, *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*, pp. 150-1.

‘simultaneously Wonderland’s slave and its queen, its creator and destroyer as well as its victim’.<sup>19</sup> The law of non-contradiction would dictate that Alice is *either* slave *or* queen; she cannot be both slave and not slave, as Auerbach argues. Having established that paradox is indeed a pervasive theme in Carroll’s nonsense we can now ask what is the effect or significance of such paradoxes.

Within the sphere of the imagination, one of the effects of this type of paradoxical play is that it nurtures a cognitive flexibility. The presence of paradox within nonsense requires the imagination to perform the critical role of envisaging the ‘impossible’ or thinking outside the parameters of logic. We know that days come one after another, and yet Carroll prompts us to conceive of the event of having several Tuesdays at once. This activity of imaginatively overstepping the boundaries of the possible resonates with the various theological deviations from Aristotelian logic that were chartered in the historical survey of the relationship between faith and reason. Garrett Green explains how followers of the Kantian tradition ‘hesitate to use the *term* imagination to describe religion, even though it would seem appropriate. To modern ears it simply sounds too much like admitting that religious belief is imaginary’.<sup>20</sup> However, if we are dissatisfied with the Kantian limitation of religion ‘within the bounds of reason alone’, then the imagination, and in particular the nonsensical imagination with its flagrant defiance of the rational, could become a force for the theology of ‘the new enlightenment’.

Interestingly, the nonsense activity of playfully rearranging the limits of the possible in some ways seems to have more in common with postmodern theology than with neighbouring literary genres. There is not much that we would expect Thomas Gradgrind to have to say to the Mad Hatter, but there is equally little that Frodo Baggins

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<sup>19</sup> Nina Auerbach, ‘Falling Alice, Fallen Women, And Victorian Dream Children’ published in ‘Soaring with the Dodo: Essays on Lewis Carroll’s Life and Art’, *English Language Notes*, Vol. XX No. 2 December 1982, (eds.) James R. Kincaird and Edward Guiliano, p. 49.

<sup>20</sup> Garrett Green, *Imagining God: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), p. 16.

and the March Hare have in common. Although both Carroll and Tolkien require from their reader an imaginative acceptance of the impossible, the nonsensical imagination seems to demand the *persistent* practice of accepting impossibilities in contrast to the initial acceptance required in order to enter a world such as Middle Earth, which, once inside, functions systematically and obeys its own rules in a consistent fashion—dragons have the property of flight, but it would be ludicrous to suggest that a dwarf might. Whereas Carroll’s nonsense—where stones transform into cakes and babies morph into pigs—requires the reader to imagine ‘six impossible things before breakfast’ and many more throughout the day. Hence, nonsense paradox entailing ‘both/and’ collisions is logically problematic in the way that Gandalf’s wizardry is not.

We have begun to explore the idea that the imaginative traversing of logical boundaries may have a theological significance and I want now to develop this by considering whether like nonsense literature, Christian theology includes paradox as an integral component.

## **ii) Christianity and Paradox**

With reference to the title of his book *Sense and Nonsense in Religion*, Sten Stenson explains ‘the word “nonsense” is meant to direct our attention to [...] the patent self-contradictions, the logical paradoxicality, of religious language’.<sup>21</sup> What Stenson’s proposition steers us towards is the indication that nonsense and theology share some commonality via paradox. Such a proposal raises several questions: is paradox a real and central aspect of the Christian faith? Or is it a misleading association altogether? Does paradox have the same meaning in literary nonsense and theology? Might there be some link via the paradoxical imagination between literary nonsense and religious faith? The

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<sup>21</sup> Sten H. Stenson, *Sense and Nonsense in Religion*, p. 22.

last two questions will be considered following a detailed investigation into the presence of paradox in the Christian faith.

In his book *Christianity and Paradox*, Ronald Hepburn uses paradox to describe some central tenets of the Christian faith, such as the belief that God is both one and fully triune. He accepts that the doctrine of the Trinity appears as an impossible belief, but claims that ‘paradoxical language is the *staple* of accounts of God’s nature and is not confined to rhetorical extravaganzas’.<sup>22</sup> Hepburn imagines the response of the unbeliever to the Christian profession of paradox:

Talking with you is impossible. No matter what absurdity, inconsistency, incoherence I locate in your theology, you will (*verbally*, that is) transform it into a new exhibition of divine ‘otherness’. You don’t even recoil when I accuse you of using language without meaning; for, you say, God can use our nonsense as the vehicle of his revelation.’ The argument, he feels, has become altogether unreal.<sup>23</sup>

There is certainly something unsettling, or at least curious, in the idea that Christianity does not seek to avoid the claim of ‘absurdity, inconsistency [and] incoherence’. Freud’s proposal that belief in God provides ‘answers to the riddles that tempt the curiosity of man’<sup>24</sup> seems to make much more sense than Hepburn’s assertion that ‘the theologian calmly *admits* [...] all these contradictions [...] and has no intention of abandoning his theology because of their presence’. If, as Freud supposes, ‘man creates God in his image’,<sup>25</sup> it seems odd that he would create, or at least invest faith in, a doctrine full of glaring inconsistencies and impossible riddles.

Of course, it may be that this language of impossibility and absurdity is being misapplied. Perhaps, as Hepburn’s unbeliever might protest, ‘paradox is too optimistic and too solemn a word for all this. It would be more honest to call it a language of

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<sup>22</sup> Ronald W. Hepburn, *Christianity and Paradox* (London: C. A. Watts & Co., 1958), p. 16.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>24</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, trans. A. A. Brill (London: The Hogarth Press, 1973), p. 26.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182.

*contradiction*'.<sup>26</sup> This is indeed Hume's position. He suggests that Christianity *willingly* presents itself as paradoxical and rests securely in its semantic contradictions. Given the general desire in the eighteenth century to purge religion of superstition and to bring it in line with rational empiricism, it is not surprising that Hume disparages the Christian appeal to mystery:

One may safely affirm, that all popular theology [...] has a kind of appetite for absurdity and contradiction. If that theology went not beyond reason and common sense, her doctrines would appear too easy and familiar. Amazement must of necessity be raised: Mystery affected: Darkness and obscurity sought after: And a foundation of merit afforded to the devout votaries, who desire an opportunity of subduing their rebellious reason by the belief of the most unintelligible sophisms.<sup>27</sup>

Hume gives the impression here that the mystery and absurdity of theological doctrines is a rhetorical strategy merely designed to repel contradiction. Hume is in agreement that the paradoxes of theology go against Aristotelian logic; he maintains, however, that this is a *deliberate* contravention manufactured from empty premises.

In contrast to Hume's opinion, Henri de Lubac argues that far from believing absurdity and contradiction to be a desirable quality in religious teaching, many theologians exhibit an Enlightenment fear that religious belief may seem implausible if it involves maxims that defy rational or reasonable limits. As a result de Lubac contends that vital paradoxes of faith have been significantly underemphasized. 'We are too desirous of being set at ease', de Lubac writes, 'and we do not consent to being taken out of our usual element. That is why we make a petty religion for ourselves and seek a petty salvation of our own petty proportions'.<sup>28</sup> De Lubac views the avoidance of religious paradox as a weakened version of orthodox faith, a sentiment that is reiterated by Ben Quash and Michael Ward in their recent book on *Heresies*, in which they remind us that heresies often come about as a result of the attempt to circumvent paradox. Quash

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<sup>26</sup> Ronald W. Hepburn, *Christianity and Paradox*, p. 16.

<sup>27</sup> David Hume, *Natural History of Religion*, quoted by T. H. Huxley, *Hume* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1879), p. 142.

<sup>28</sup> Henri de Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith*, trans. Sadie Kreilkamp (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), p. 15.

explains: ‘Heretics have often been shy of the full radicalness of orthodox Christianity, such that their alternatives have been almost rather common-sensical by comparison’.<sup>29</sup> By associating heresies with a more common-sense interpretation of faith, Quash seems to reinforce the apparent connection between nonsense and orthodox faith.

At this point, it will be helpful to clarify the options canvassed so far. The prevalence of paradox in Christian doctrine can be explained in three ways. Firstly, as suggested by Freud, doctrinal ‘paradoxes’ are not an impossible breach with rational thought since man has mentally created the God he desires. Paradox in this case is a rhetorical trope and should thus be viewed either poetically, if it is helpful to the individual, or dismissed as a deception, if it is unhelpful. Secondly, based on Hume’s account of Christianity, paradox may be a device used to deflect attention away from an empty premise to inspire a false sense of awe. The third alternative, adumbrated by de Lubac, Hepburn and Stenson, is that paradox is in fact an accurate description of a doctrine, which does not merely pertain to the order of language, but is rather an attempt to signify that which seems to be *of its nature* paradoxical. My main concern in this chapter is not to prove that what is deemed paradoxical is right, but to consider how accurately such a description reflects Christian doctrine.<sup>30</sup>

Before proceeding, however, a general caveat is necessary. The study of paradox within religion is inevitably approached from the perspective of man, since it would be impossible to speculate on a theocentric understanding of the inner workings of the Trinity. De Lubac is of the opinion that ‘paradox is the reverse of what, properly perceived, would be synthesis. But, proper view always eludes us’.<sup>31</sup> This is an important point to bear in mind, for in thinking theologically, we never possess an ultimate or

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<sup>29</sup> *Heresies and How to Avoid Them*, Ben Quash and Michael Ward (London: SPCK, 2007), p. 7.

<sup>30</sup> This trilogy of distinctions is not in reality so clear-cut. One might have legitimate grounds for asking how easy it is to draw the line between linguistic and ontological paradox. For example, if Christians are not expected to believe that a camel can really pass through the eye of a needle, it is arguably not immediately obvious that they should insist upon the seriousness of God’s Triunity.

<sup>31</sup> Henri de Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith*, p. 9.



exhaustive perspective. What de Lubac seems to be saying is not that paradox is therefore a false conclusion—indeed, he maintains it is in our present state the most accurate way of expressing certain theological truths. Rather, de Lubac is referring to the fact that Christians conceive of reality as both partial and provisional. However it is *within* this scope of partial understanding that Christians are prepared for and receive intimations of God’s ultimate reality. The language of paradox therefore gestures towards this reality, but is inevitably inadequate to express it fully.

It is important to emphasise that this does not constitute an exemption from or a way around the language of illogicality and nonsense. By claiming that paradox is not an ultimate property of Christian dogma, many theologians seek to avoid the charges of irrationality. As I have already indicated, James Anderson’s work on paradox concentrates on the *appearance* of contradiction enabling him to put forward his rational defence of theological paradox. ‘Paradoxical doctrines’, he states, ‘do not involve real contradiction, that is, they do not posit logically impossible states of affairs. Rather, they are instances of merely apparent contradiction’.<sup>32</sup> De Lubac’s approach is different, though, because he focuses on the significance of the apparent contradiction and conducts his theology from what appears to be the case within our limited conceptions of the real. Anderson, by contrast, seeks to start immediately from the eschatological and thereby reassures himself and the reader that absurdity plays no part in theological paradox.

This desire to achieve logical credibility is not limited to Anderson’s treatise. Two promising essays in a collection on Kierkegaard entitled ‘Christianity and Nonsense’ and ‘Kierkegaard: “Paradox” and Irrationalism’ both seek to undo the charge that Kierkegaardian theology contains elements of the absurd and the nonsensical. Like Anderson, moments of unreason are rejected as insignificant on the basis that they are not ultimately unreasonable: ‘Kierkegaard’s position is that even those claims which appear

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<sup>32</sup> James Anderson, *Paradox in Christian Theology*, p. 263.

to unbelief as absurd or contradictory are not essentially, permanently, and incorrigibly so'.<sup>33</sup> Be that as it may, there are also modern theologians supporting de Lubac who want to acknowledge that the appearance of absurdity is itself of consequence. John Milbank, for example, recognises the importance of de Lubac's central concern with paradox whilst also maintaining a belief in the ultimate harmony of God's Kingdom. 'Paradox', writes Milbank, rejecting Žižek's dialectic resolution, 'affirms the full reality of the impossible and the contradictory'.<sup>34</sup> Here, Milbank establishes the importance of observing the paradoxical dimension of Christian theology not because he believes the contradictory contains within itself any essential permanence, but rather, because paradox enables the possibility of theological reflection from our current fallen situation. In other words, the employment of paradox gives theology a language through which it can represent 'impossible and contradictory' realities.

The desire to overstep the 'full reality of the impossible' and focus only on the projected reality of ultimate resolution in many ways offers an impoverished account of Christian theology and can carry religious descriptions away from any recognizable view of reality. By contrast, the language of nonsense and paradox has the potential to address the 'full reality' of life as it is conceived by Christianity— at once reconciled and yet still fallen. Faith, conceived as a matter of hope,<sup>35</sup> always begins with the openness to a reality which is beyond formal certainty, and to this extent one would at some point expect there to be a crucial and problematic correspondence between language and reality, experience and truth. Perhaps an approach that incorporates the need at times to venture the other side of reason might in the end turn out to be a more rational path to the place of permanent reconciliation. Thus we are essentially asking whether we should conduct theology from a position of ultimate harmony or begin within the current state of fallen

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<sup>33</sup> Alastair Mckinnon, 'Kierkegaard: "Paradox" and Irrationalism' in Jerry H. Gill, (ed.) *Essays on Kierkegaard* (Minneapolis: Burgess Publishing, 1969), p. 109.

<sup>34</sup> John Milbank 'The Double Glory, or Paradox Versus Dialectics: On Not Quite Agreeing with Slavoj Žižek' in *The Monstrosity of Christ*, p. 198.

<sup>35</sup> Hebrews 11:1 'faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen'.

confusion. My proposal is that both are necessary and neither perspective can be negated without distortion. This in itself requires a type of paradoxical imagining as the proposition, ‘the world is and is not fallen’ establishes a sort of theological paradox about paradox—that the ‘impossible and the contradictory’ both is and is not a full reality.

We are now in a position to respond to the question: what role, if any, do paradoxes assume in Christian dogma? Outlined in what follows are six central tenets of orthodox Christianity that will be examined to discover if they entail full logical paradox. The more general connection between Christian faith and the nonsensical imagination will then be explored in the chapter’s conclusion.

## **Doctrinal Paradox**

### **iii) Knowledge: veiled and disclosed**

We can begin our investigation by considering the apparent contradiction in the Christian teaching that God both reveals himself and remains transcendent, even within his immanent self-disclosure. Is this, however, a paradox? At first glance, it seems as if there is no actual paradox. I can, for example, know certain things about a friend without possessing an entirely comprehensive knowledge of that person. Surely, the same might be true of our relationship with God? We can know him in certain ways comprehensible to us, the attributes he has chosen to make known, whilst still accepting that other characteristics belong to a supremely transcendent nature. This appears to accord with St Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, in which he tells them: ‘for now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully’.<sup>36</sup> It seems therefore that there is no need to apply the term paradox in this situation, as it is clear that the

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<sup>36</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:12.

current condition of man's knowledge of the divine is limited to some extent. This conclusion does not breach the law of non-contradiction since it accepts that God is in part immanently knowable and in part uniquely transcendent.

However, Paul complicates his own statement in the very same letter by describing a supreme unity between the believer and God's inmost Spirit. He writes:

these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything even the depths of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the word, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit [...] we have the mind of Christ.<sup>37</sup>

Here, Paul presents knowledge of God as a union with the 'mind of Christ' and the Spirit of God, which is God himself. Paul believes Christians inherit this Spirit of true comprehension, albeit subject to the limitations of the finite mind, which presents us with a very different reality to the previous description of seeing through the mirror dimly. What can we make of this? One possibility is that Paul is mistaken in one or both of the accounts. Another option though is that taken together they point towards a reality, which individually they are inadequate to express. This of course is the logic of paradox. Paul seems to be holding in tension two opposing ideas, neither of which Christian teaching appears willing to relinquish.

These twin aspects emerge later as a split between Eastern and Western traditions—of which Aquinas and Palamas may be taken as respective representatives—although both traditions reveal a paradoxical core at the centre of the question of God's knowability. Thus, Aquinas teaches that although man's knowledge of God is limited, through grace humanity can be raised to an intellectual vision of the divine essence itself, whereas Palamas corresponding to a traditionally Eastern approach—conceives of supreme unknowability as an exclusive property of

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<sup>37</sup> 1 Corinthians 2:10–13, 16.

divinity. As we shall see below, Palamas believes that we can participate in and know God through his *energies* (the outward expression of his internal essence), whilst upholding an impenetrable barrier between God's infinite essence and man's finite comprehension.

Both perspectives teach that knowledge of God in some sense or of some kind is possible. Let us consider the differences in more detail in order to ascertain how the accounts differ, why there is a paradoxical tension in uniting them, and if this act of unification is a necessary one. At this stage, I am concerned solely with Christianity's presentation of how God is known by man, I do not seek to promote one perspective above the other, merely to explore whether it is essential for an accurate depiction of Christian theology to uphold an element of its paradoxical character.

#### a) Aquinas: Graced Intellect

*Whoever has seen me has seen the Father*

John 14:9

'It must be absolutely granted', states Aquinas, 'that the blessed see the essence of God'.<sup>38</sup> In order to understand Aquinas' position, we must begin, as he does, from Augustine's premise that 'God is truly and absolutely simple'.<sup>39</sup> Aquinas develops the doctrine of simplicity to emphasise that God's properties are identical with who he is. So, for example, God does not merely *have* love, but he *is* love. As a consequence of this belief, Aquinas observes, 'His nature does not differ from His "suppositum"; nor His essence from His existence [...] Therefore, it is clear that God is nowise composite, but is altogether simple'.<sup>40</sup> The corollary of this proposal is that man cannot think of God in

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<sup>38</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *ST*, 1, q.12. a.1, ans, trans. Timothy McDermott (London: Methuen, 1991).

<sup>39</sup> Augustine *De Trinitate* iv, 6,7. trans. Edmund Hill, in *The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *ST*, 1, q. 3 a. 7.

part, as God is not composed of parts. In God, all attributes are united because he is simple. This implies that to posit God at all is to posit God entirely, and as man has a composite nature and discursive reason, it would seem that it is impossible for him to comprehend infinite simplicity. The problem as presented by Aquinas seems to be that if God cannot be known in his essence, he cannot be known at all because his essence *is* his existence. Aquinas thus acknowledges ‘it is impossible for any created intellect to see the essence of God by its own natural power’,<sup>41</sup> though he proceeds to suggest that ‘to see the essence of God is possible to the created intellect by grace’.<sup>42</sup>

According to the Thomist emphasis, then, it is accurate to state that man can know God’s essential nature if God grants an individual the gift of graced intelligibility. An important aspect of Aquinas’ description is that unintelligibility in relation to the divine is to do with the inborn fallen capacity of man’s intellect, rather than any inscrutability within God’s nature. Fundamentally, Aquinas insists, ‘Since everything is knowable according as it is actual, God, Who is pure act without any admixture of potentiality, is in Himself supremely knowable’.<sup>43</sup>

#### b) Palamas: Essential Inaccessibility

*No one has ever seen God*

John 1: 18

Palamas distinguishes between God’s energies and his essence and believes it is possible to establish certain positive predicates of God’s essential being whilst insisting that these predicates stem from God’s energies and not the divine essence itself. ‘The Holy Fathers,’

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 1, q. 12, a. 4, ans.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., a. 4, sed contra.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., a. 1, ans. The Thomist position is of course not quite so clear-cut; he retains at some ultimate level the principle of absolute transcendence or the *via eminentiae*. However for the sake of demonstrating the Eastern/Western divide I have emphasised Aquinas’ commentary on the supreme knowability of God.

he writes, ‘affirm unanimously that it is impossible to find a name to manifest the nature of the uncreated Trinity, but that the names belong to the energies’.<sup>44</sup> Palamas, like Aquinas, is cautious to retain God’s integral unity by explaining that ‘God complete is present in each of the divine energies’,<sup>45</sup> but unlike Aquinas, he insists that unknowability is an indissoluble property of divine nature. This creates a somewhat paradoxical expression: ‘God is entirely present in each of the divine energies [...] although it is clear that He transcends all of them’.<sup>46</sup>

Palamas seems to be insisting that God’s energies both manifest and preserve his unknowable essence. He tells us that God is both beyond his creation *and* intimately accessible through it. Palamas’ theory of knowledge of the divine combines concealment with disclosure, insisting that God’s essence is unknowable, but is nonetheless directly experienced through his energies. Like Aquinas, Palamas believes the experience of God is related to an individual’s state of grace.

To summarise: Aquinas stipulates that if God is known, he is known in his essential simplicity, whilst maintaining that humanity lacks the noetic faculty to comprehend God, hence the necessary elevation of the intellect through grace. Palamas on the other hand states that God can give himself to be known in some sense via his energies, whilst remaining eminently transcendent. Put simply and formulated according to the principal of non-contradiction, Aquinas states ‘we think of God and yet we cannot think of God’. Palamas, however, proposes ‘we can think of God and yet God cannot be thought of’. The first is an epistemological problem concerned with how man relates to God (since through the grace of God in revelation, man is able to comprehend the incomprehensible). The second is concerned with the category of revelation, according to which Palamas

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<sup>44</sup> Gregory Palamas, *The Triads*, trans. Nicholas Gendle (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1983), p. 97.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 95–6.

maintains God is both within his self-disclosure and yet remains distinct from it. We may identify the underlying continuity of these views with reference to a third perspective.

### c) Denys: Beyond Unknowing

Both Aquinas and Palamas are concerned with the question of knowability—how can we comprehend an ineffable God? Denys approaches the question by asking the reverse—how can we not comprehend God? He writes, ‘[t]here is nothing in the world without a share in the Beautiful and the Good’.<sup>47</sup> This is a reflection of Paul’s assertion that ‘[God’s] invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So men are without excuse’.<sup>48</sup> Denys seems to celebrate the paradoxical dynamism of knowledge of God. He writes: ‘it says of the One who is present in all things and who may be discovered from all things that he is ungraspable and inscrutable’.<sup>49</sup> This claim is based on a latter part of the same Pauline epistle in which its author professes: ‘Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!’<sup>50</sup>

In identifying God as a being ‘who may be discovered from all things’ and who yet remains ‘inscrutable’, Denys affirms, like Aquinas, the division between God’s simple being and human discursive understanding while maintaining a Palamite emphasis of kataphatic self-disclosure through cosmic expressions. This is why Denys praises God in the tongue of paradox proclaiming him the source of all, as every name and yet above

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<sup>47</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius ‘The Divine Names’ in *The Complete Works*, p. 77.

<sup>48</sup> Romans 1:19-20.

<sup>49</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius ‘The Divine Names,’ p. 105, based on Romans 11:33.

<sup>50</sup> Romans 11:33.



any name and as the nameless one.<sup>51</sup> This suggests that from a Christian perspective it is proper, and indeed praiseworthy, that God cannot be known and cannot not be known.

We began by identifying the logical problem present in a Christian account of knowledge of God and it is this: God gives himself to be known and yet he remains simultaneously unknown. We described how the gap between created things and their creator both is and is not absolute; it is traversed both ‘positively’ according to Aquinas and ‘negatively’ by Palamas. Important to both is the unique combination of presence and eminence which reveals a God who is ‘not only beyond all affirmations but all negations too’.<sup>52</sup>

Thus, we are left in an orthodox theological space—whether that orthodoxy is defined from an Eastern or Western point of view—and yet it is also a space that troubles the law of non-contradiction, for although Christians believe that ‘God is beyond understanding and reason’, they simultaneously maintain that he is ‘beyond every denial’.<sup>53</sup> It seems in this instance that Christianity accepts the contravention of the law of non-contradiction as the most accurate way of describing reality in order to allow for ‘the paradoxical coincidence of God’s transcendence and immanence’.<sup>54</sup> The theologians discussed in this section seem to praise mystery and paradox as the commendable attempt to speak of God and the joyous inevitability of falling short of supreme clarity, as if the partial is itself a proper expression of divine majesty. A paradoxical account of knowledge of God—which advertises a conceptual inadequacy in pointing towards a complex reality—therefore seems to be both more workable and a more accurate reflection of that which is the case (in spite of its contradictions) than a purely ‘rational’ resolution.

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<sup>51</sup> ‘The theologians praise it by every name—and as the Nameless One’ Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, p. 54.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>53</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius ‘Mystical Theology’ in *The Complete Works*, p. 141.

<sup>54</sup> Matthew C. Bagger, *The Uses of Paradox*, p. 32.

#### **iv) Incarnation: divine and human**

The logical conflict involved in the doctrine of the Incarnation pertains to the belief that Christ exists as a single hypostasis with two natures, which are united and yet remain distinct. The definition agreed on at Chalcedon states the following: ‘we all with one accord teach men to acknowledge one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man’.<sup>55</sup> An inherent property of being human is not to be divine and the same would seem to be true of the reverse. Framing the point as a matter of logic, Aristotle has informed us ‘it is not possible that it should be simultaneously true to say that the same thing is a man and is not a man’.<sup>56</sup> Yet this appears to be the affirmation of Chalcedon. Christ is properly a man insofar as he is fully human and he is by definition not a man because he is fully divine. The breach with the law of non-contradiction is explicit, as one contemporary philosopher summarises: ‘This is called the Absolute Paradox at which Reason can only stand appalled’.<sup>57</sup>

How can we even begin a rational discussion of what seems such a rationally indefensible idea? Michael Goulder expresses the view that, ‘Paradoxes are a sign that we have to stop thinking anthropomorphically; and they are a tool for thinking theologically about the one who cannot be comprehended with clear-cut univocal terms’.<sup>58</sup> It is clear that in discussing the Incarnation we are trying to overcome some of the limits of univocal expression by contemplating one being who is ‘truly God and truly man’. We need to find some manner of simultaneous identification, as it is the simultaneity of both God and man that seems to be central to any discussion of the Incarnation. In seeking a departure from ‘clear-cut univocal terms’ perhaps an artistic depiction could prove

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<sup>55</sup> The Fourth Ecumenical Council held in Chalcedon in 451, quoted in *Heresies and How to Avoid Them*, p. 12.

<sup>56</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1006b32, p.10.

<sup>57</sup> Richard Campbell, ‘Lessing’s problem and Kierkegaard’s answer’ in *Essays on Kierkegaard*, p. 77.

<sup>58</sup> Michael Goulder, *Incarnation and Myth* (London, SCM Press LTD, 1979), p. 52.

helpful, since visual expression may have the potential to outwit the sequential tendencies of language by juxtaposing images in a single frame and thus preserving the call within Christian theology to have things ‘both ways’. Jeremy Begbie has pointed out how music provides a useful analogy for the Incarnation in the way that two notes can simultaneously occupy the same space and interpenetrate each other without losing or altering their identity: ‘we are reminded that we are not dealing with two realities vying for the same space, but with God interacting with the world intimately, without violating it or merging with it, liberating it to be more fully itself’.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, an appeal to artistic interpretations of the Incarnation might assist the attempt to find out whether what appears *prima facie* as a logical contradiction is actually as paradoxical as it seems.

It may not be immediately obvious that the ruling of Chalcedon represents the best possible description of the Incarnation, and this has been evidenced by the many ‘heresies’ within the history of Christianity that seek to avoid encountering paradox in the person of Christ. Arianism, for example, denies Christ’s full divinity claiming that God the Father created Christ his human son, who was not previously existent. We can see in Tristán de Escamilla’s painting, ‘The Adoration of the Shepherds’,<sup>60</sup> that Christ has the potential to be mistaken for an Arian portrayal. In particular, the exposure of Christ’s genitalia twinned with Mary’s maternal attitude acts to emphasise his humanity. Additionally, there is a clear depiction of God the Father, with a banner proclaiming his majesty, but the light from heaven is dispersed by the time it reaches the child in the manger and we are left with a God in heaven and a baby on earth, but no definite link between them. This illustrates the underlying problem of Arianism, since Christ is not identified as a true member of the Trinity; he is neither co-eternal nor co-equal with the Father, which therefore shatters God’s triunity.

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<sup>59</sup> Jeremy Begbie, *Beholding the Glory* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 2001), p. 146.

<sup>60</sup> Luis Tristán de Escamilla, *The Adoration of the Shepherds* (1620), Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

The heresy of Docetism, conversely, holds that Christ was human in form, but his nature was solely divine. During the fourth century, Apollinarius of Laodicea (c. 310- c.390) argued that Christ had neither a human mind nor soul. This became known as the heresy of Apollinarianism and was ruled as heterodox by the Council of Constantinople in 381. Geertgen tot Sint Jans' painting 'The Nativity at Night'<sup>61</sup> could be considered as the presentation of a Docetic Christ, who lacks true identification with humanity. In this case, the Christ-child appears alone in the centre detached from any physical affection. This gives him an unearthly appearance, which makes it difficult to recognise him as the Son of Man. Mary does not assume a maternal or nurturing pose (as we see with Tristán) but an attitude of worship. This makes the crib symbolic of an altar with the angels surrounding it adopting a similar pose. Notably, the front of the crib is left open inviting the viewer to approach the picture in a likewise reverent manner. Geertgen thus shows us a picture of God on earth who does not appear incognito as the Son. The solemnity of Mary, twinned with equally sombre angels, identifies Jesus as God's son but not Mary's. It is this lack of unity which is problematic in the Docetic heresy.

Nestorianism entails a different divisive heresy in the claim that Christ existed as two separate persons, not as a single unified hypostasis. The antithesis of Nestorianism is the heresy of Eutychianism, which mingles the two natures of Christ to the extent of claiming that Christ is a single subsistence with one nature. Although the various deviations from Chalcedon outlined above are considered heterodox, they reveal that the paradoxical status of the Incarnation is not always accepted. Today, the more common challenge Christians face is the inadvertent slipping into heretical patterns of thought by over-emphasising one or other of Christ's twin natures.

The significance of the decision reached by Chalcedon is of great importance for the doctrine of Salvation, which asserts that only a man could be the sacrificial substitute

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<sup>61</sup> Geertgen tot Sint Jans *Nativity, at Night* (1484-90), National Gallery, London.

for the sin of man whilst also insisting that only God could be the perfect unblemished sacrifice to reconcile a fallen world. By asserting that Christ is fully God and fully man, Christianity is able to state that Christ alone is distinctive in his enhypostatic existence, and as a sinless being is unique in his salvific capacity, and yet as man he is able to take the place of everyman. Let us examine these two poles further to determine why Christian teaching seems to require such an oxymoronic conjunction.

a) Only God could be the perfect, sinless sacrifice for sin.

*And being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.*

Hebrews 5:9

The author of Hebrews locates the all-sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice in his divinity: 'For Christ has entered [...] into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf'.<sup>62</sup> Here it is clear that Christ's offering as a sacrifice for the sin of man is of another order to the sacrifices made by the high priests in the earthly tabernacle; Christ presents himself on the divine altar as a divine sacrifice. Karl Barth stipulates that the world needed to be redeemed by God, for God, and therefore agrees that only a divine sacrifice could be sufficient. Barth relatedly proposes that the one sent must also be the sender: one essence, in a triune mode. He writes: 'His divine unity consists in the fact that in Himself He is both the one who is obeyed and Another who obeys'.<sup>63</sup> By maintaining the importance of 'divine unity', Barth tells us that Christ is fully divine and in full unison with the divine essence.

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<sup>62</sup> Hebrews 9:24.

<sup>63</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics 4:1*, (eds.) T. F. Torrance and G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), p. 201.

b) Only man could be the penal substitute for everyman.

*But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.*

Galatians 4:4-5

The acceptance that Jesus Christ is fully divine begs an important question concerning how divinity can ‘stand in’ for humanity. Logic would appear to dictate that if it is man who has fallen then it must be man who atones. The author who describes Christ as ‘the exact imprint’<sup>64</sup> of divine nature also stipulates that ‘he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might [...] make propitiation for the sins of the people’.<sup>65</sup>

Propitiation here designates a satisfactory sacrifice, effecting atonement on behalf of the one(s) for whom the sacrifice was made. On this point, Paul is clear: ‘For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous’.<sup>66</sup> In order for Christ’s propitiation to be redemptive for humanity, his mode as man must not simply be an appearance, but a full participation in the essence of ‘man-ness’. The apostles are told in the book of Acts ‘this Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven’.<sup>67</sup> In other words, Christians believe that Christ will retain his humanity even after his ascension, in perpetuity. Hence, insofar as Christ is man, his human mode is the manifestation of his soteriological mission presently, historically and eternally.

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<sup>64</sup> Hebrews 1:3.

<sup>65</sup> Hebrews 2:17.

<sup>66</sup> Romans 5:19.

<sup>67</sup> Acts 1:11.

c) The supreme mediator

*For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.*

1 Timothy 2:5

Something of the careful balancing of the above two poles can be seen in Guido Reni's painting, 'The Adoration of the Shepherds'.<sup>68</sup> Reni depicts light spilling from heaven, which illuminates and enhances earth. This portrayal seems to merge the divinity of Geertgen's painting with the humanity of Tristán's. On the one hand, Reni's shepherds are gathered around the child, cradled by his mother. In this sense, the observer can relate to Christ as the Son of Man. Yet, at the same time, the child is illumined by celestial light from above. The stable is otherwise dark (unlike Tristán's stable where the divine light is almost superfluous to the brightness of the painting), which gives the luminescent child a sense of the other-worldly. Reni thus effectively communicates Christ's divine presence *and* his human status by depicting the tension between Christ's manhood and his divinity in a single frame.

R. T. Herbert preserves the paradoxical status of the Incarnation in his reflection upon the logical unintelligibility of the doctrine with reference to Kierkegaard's employment of the term 'God-man'. He concludes, 'whether it was written inadvertently in confusion or intentionally in moments of great clarity is here a question that need not concern us [...] the idea is absurd; it does involve contradiction; it is a breach with all thinking; it is unintelligible'.<sup>69</sup> The 'breach with all thinking' is the proclamation that Christ has, in the words of Anselm, 'assumed a human being into the unity of his person, so that the two natures, namely, the divine and the human, are one person'.<sup>70</sup> These two natures, according to the Chalcedonian definition are fully united and remain fully

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<sup>68</sup> Guido Reni, *The Adoration of the Shepherds* (circ. 1640), National Gallery, London.

<sup>69</sup> R. T. Herbert, *Paradox and Identity in Theology* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 83.

<sup>70</sup> St Anselm, 'On the Incarnation of the Word' in *The Major Works*, p. 252.

distinct, a single subsistence existent both in time and not in time, dying whilst never-ceasing.

So we are left once again with a proposition that appears to carry us ‘beyond and above the light of the law and reason’: one plus one equals one (and two). From a secular perspective, it would seem that man cannot meaningfully engage with such an absurd concept. Yet Christianity claims not to promote a fantasy of hypostatic insanity but instead regards the dual natures of Christ as a necessity for entering into a salvific relationship with God. And the paradoxical formulation of the doctrine of the Incarnation seems to be the most precise and perhaps even the only way of holding onto all aspects of this complex reality. The Chalcedonian definition is therefore not a matter of mere rhetoric, but a meaningful and indispensable articulation of orthodox Christian teaching, *by virtue* and not in spite of its non-compliance with the law of non-contradiction.

#### **v) Trinity: plurality and unity**

The doctrine of the Trinity is, from a purely rational perspective, one of the most overtly baffling beliefs of the Christian religion. The central problem is that the doctrine defies the logical principle that something numerically one cannot also be numerically three. The Athanasian Creed states: ‘the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God; and yet they are not three Gods, but one God’.<sup>71</sup> The Creed seems to affirm the impossible that one God is contained in three separate hypostases, which are permanently interwoven and uniquely distinct: ‘neither confounding the persons nor dividing the substance’.<sup>72</sup> At the heart of triune being, according to the Creed, is the co-existence of unity and distinction, where the unity is without uniformity and the distinctions exist without division.

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<sup>71</sup> Athanasian Creed (c. 500 A.D.).

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.



We need first to establish if it is vital for Christian faith that the believer subscribes to the rigid Athanasian description of the Trinity. It is not immediately clear that strict adherence is necessary, particularly since there is no explicit reference to ‘the Trinity’ within Scripture.<sup>73</sup> As such, the paradoxical account of three persons united in one substance was deeply contested in the early church, chiefly by Sabellius (c. early 3<sup>rd</sup> Century) and Arius (c. 256-336). Sabellius offered a resolution to the conflict by describing the Father, Son and Spirit as different appearances or manifestations of one deity. Sabellius sought to stress God’s supreme singularity, and did so by denying his diversity. This departs from the Athanasian account because it denies the permanent embodiment of these expressions. The Creed, however, requires the belief that the Father, Son and Spirit are eternal incarnations and not merely historical appearances.

An alternative divergence from the Athanasian Creed that also avoids a paradoxical understanding of the Trinity is the denial of divine *homoousios* (one substance) and the description of God as *homoiousios* (like substance). This is the position of Arianism. Allison FitzSimons explains: ‘He [Arius] thought that the unity of God could be preserved only by excluding all distinctions from within the divine nature, making Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit into two inferior deities’.<sup>74</sup> Arianism seems on the one hand to make sense of certain biblical passages that testify to a hierarchy within the godhead, for example, Christ’s admission: ‘the Father is greater than I’.<sup>75</sup> But Arianism encounters a problem with conflicting statements such as Christ’s testimony that ‘I and the Father are one’.<sup>76</sup> A further attempt to dissolve the apparent logical contradiction of the Trinity is the account of *Tritheism*, which overemphasises the

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<sup>73</sup> A certain amount of scepticism has arisen surrounding a definition of the Trinity as three distinct persons sharing one divine substance due to the discovery that an expressly Athanasian statement on the Trinity is a medieval insertion into the original biblical text. The Johannine comma, as it is called, states: ‘For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost; and these are three in one’ (1 John 5.7-9). Owing to the evidence that this phrase is not genuinely canonical, some regard the principle of ‘three in one’ as potentially misleading.

<sup>74</sup> FitzSimons C. Allison, *The Cruelty of Heresies* (Harrisburg: Moorehouse, 2002), p. 84.

<sup>75</sup> John 14:28.

<sup>76</sup> John 10:30.

distinction between the persons of the Trinity to the point of espousing a belief in three separate deities.

However, Richard of St Victor (1112-1173) maintained that a paradoxical view of the Triune God is a matter of the utmost theological significance, even though the internal coherence of the Trinity goes beyond human comprehension. Perhaps the foremost reason why Richard affirms the importance of the Athanasian account of the Trinity concerns his emphasis on the perfection of divine love. He believes that ‘sharing of love cannot exist among any less than three persons’, concluding therefore ‘in Divinity it is impossible for two persons not to be united to a third’.<sup>77</sup> The vital tensions of this paradox outlined by Richard are unity and plurality,<sup>78</sup> which will be explored individually to establish whether the paradoxical character of the Trinity is a necessary, accidental or merely apparent feature of the Christian doctrine.

a) Unity of Substance

*But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit is all one, the glory equal, the majesty coeternal.*

Athanasian Creed

Richard describes the importance of expressing true unity of substance within the Trinity as ‘the overwhelming indivisibility of that oneness of God within which all things are banded together as one in the possession of a transcendent unity’.<sup>79</sup> A ‘transcendent unity’ in Richard’s account affirms, in line with the Creed, that the persons of the Trinity are co-equal, co-eternal and in essence identical. He writes, ‘Not only is what each person is completely the same; but each one is what each other is. And so, supreme simplicity is in

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<sup>77</sup> Richard of St Victor, *Book Three of the Trinity*, in *The Complete Works* (London: SPCK, 1979), p. 388.

<sup>78</sup> ‘Now observe how incomprehensible is that coequality of greatness from every viewpoint and in every respect in that Trinity where unity does not lack plurality and plurality does not go beyond unity!’ Richard of St. Victor, *Book Three of the Trinity*, p. 396.

<sup>79</sup> Richard of St. Victor, *The Twelve Patriarchs*, p. 129.

each; true and supreme unity is in all together'.<sup>80</sup> Richard's view of co-equality at the transcendental level consists in identity. At a human level co-equality equates to mutual similitude, but not necessarily identity. Yet at the divine level if equality does not amount to sameness then, as Richard demonstrates, equality cannot be correctly applied, since their perfection requires a symmetry of pre-eminence.

A similar argument applies to the assertion of co-eternality: the triune attribute of eternity must be identical as eternity has no degrees. As Richard affirms, '[t]here no one is greater than another, no one is less than another; there no one is before another; no one is after another'.<sup>81</sup> Further, since Christianity holds that God is immutable, it is fundamental for Richard to emphasise that the divine persons exist co-eternally, as there is 'no variation or shadow due to change'<sup>82</sup> in the triune God. There is nothing in the assertion of God's unity of substance that is by itself strikingly paradoxical, but we must now turn to the other side of the tension, the plurality of persons in the Trinity, whilst keeping in mind the necessity of his unity.

#### b) Plurality of Persons

*For there is one person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Spirit.*

#### Athanasian Creed

Richard balances his account of absolute unity by also affirming in imperative terms the true plurality of God. He starts from the premise that God is supreme perfection and supreme goodness and then claims that charity is a necessary part of goodness and therefore infers that God is fully charitable. Supreme charity for Richard is contingent upon the presence of reciprocal and co-equal persons on whom to bestow charity, and from whom to receive. Richard asserts that God's aseity is such that he cannot rely on

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<sup>80</sup> Richard of St. Victor, *Book Three of the Trinity*, p. 395.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, p. 394.

<sup>82</sup> James 1:17.

created beings to respond to divine charity, since this situates the divine nature in potentiality, relying on created beings to articulate his fullness. As a result, Richard contends, there must be a plurality of persons, who are equal in majesty and eternally distinct in order to partake in infinite, supreme charity.

Richard's account of the Trinity thus confirms the utter oneness of a thing that is numerically plural. To accept both poles of this statement is a logical paradox because the two premises held together contradict each other. Allison phrases the paradox of the Trinity as a question to which he can give no rational answer: 'it is clear that the New Testament teaches nothing of three gods, it is equally clear that there are significant distinctions between Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. They are distinct, they are related, they are one. How can this be so?'<sup>83</sup> Despite the fact that the coherence of the immanent Trinity surpasses human comprehension, Allison and Richard both agree with the Creed that both the utter unity and complete diversity of God is a necessary paradox.

Although, as we have noted, the particular word 'Trinity' is not a biblical expression, there are, however, numerous examples affirming both unity and diversity within Scripture. When asked what is the most important commandment Christ answers: 'Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one'.<sup>84</sup> This is held in tension with the designation of Christ himself as 'Lord' and 'God'.<sup>85</sup> In 'The Great Commission' Christ testifies to the union and the diversity of the Trinity by instructing the apostles to 'make disciples of the nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'.<sup>86</sup> What is significant here is that Christ refers to the 'name' of the three persons as a singular appellation. These three distinctions are elsewhere shown to be eternally existent, as Christ claims that the Father loved him 'before the foundation of the

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<sup>83</sup> FitzSimons C. Allison, *The Cruelty of Heresies*, p. 72.

<sup>84</sup> Mark 12:29.

<sup>85</sup> Thomas hails Jesus: 'my Lord and my God' John 20:28, see also 2 Peter 1:1, Romans 9:5, Titus 2:13, John 10:30-33.

<sup>86</sup> Matthew 28:19.

world'<sup>87</sup> and that there was (and is) a mutual indwelling and relationship between the Father and the Son prior to the existence of creation.<sup>88</sup> This suggests that Sabellianism and Arianism are not wholly satisfactory representations of Christian belief.

Karl Rahner writes that 'the Dogma of the Trinity is an absolute mystery which we do not understand even after it has been revealed'.<sup>89</sup> Richard suggests that although we cannot understand the mystery of the Trinity, we can know (through grace) that the Trinity is a mysterious unity of plurality. He believes that spiritual encounters enable humanity to sense the immanent Trinity and that Scripture facilitates participation in the economic Trinity. Richard insists upon upholding the paradoxical components of the Creed because to dispense with either God's unity or his plurality lessens the supremacy of his love.

In his use of paradox, Richard is presenting what he sees as the best description of reality. He does not seem to be putting forward a logical paradox in order to confuse or mystify, but because without it he believes we lose the full understanding of divine love. In the introduction to Richard's works, Grover Zinn explores the idea that if true trinity is abandoned then love in its purest sense and most perfect sense is no longer a characteristic we can attribute to God. Echoing Richard's imperative language Zinn writes: 'in reflecting on the nature of divine perfection and the presence of charity, he [Richard] shows that not only are two persons necessary for love, but three are necessary for the fullest of all loves, charity'.<sup>90</sup>

To conclude: Richard represents the view of orthodox Christianity when he outlines the Trinity: 'individuality in persons and unity in substance and equality in majesty'.<sup>91</sup> The account of God's triunity expressed by Richard and the Athanasian Creed

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<sup>87</sup> 'You loved me before the foundation of the world' John 17:24.

<sup>88</sup> Cf. John 17:5.

<sup>89</sup> Karl Rahner, 'The Problem of the Concept of the Person' in *The Trinity*, trans, J. Donceel (New York: Sunbury, 1974), p. 51.

<sup>90</sup> Grover A. Zinn, *Richard of St Victor* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1979) p. 9.

<sup>91</sup> Richard of St Victor, *Book Three of the Trinity*, p. 381.

thus appears to be a precise and necessary description, although it is paradoxical and to a certain degree unintelligible. Zinn agrees that Richard's account of the Trinity is in many ways an 'unreasonable' doctrine, explaining 'there is an absence of any proof from experience or an a priori demonstration by reasoning; it is also the case that once known, the Trinity is not something that is "reasonable"'.<sup>92</sup> However, perhaps the expression 'God is love' helps to explain why Christianity insists on holding onto a paradoxical that defies the boundaries of rational discourse. To maintain that love is who God is and not merely an attribute contingent upon creation requires, as we have seen, the belief in a true diversity of persons within supreme singularity. Hence, for believers, the significance of the paradoxical status of the Trinity is that it allows Christians to describe God as the one, true, Supreme Being without diminishing the perfection of his love.

#### **vi) The Will of Man: bound and free**

The conflict surrounding the Christian description of the will revolves around the insistence that salvation rests upon man's autonomous choice to follow God and the simultaneous teaching that this 'choice' is fully reliant on God's grace. On the one hand, the Bible indicates that justification is 'through faith [...] for all who believe',<sup>93</sup> whilst on the other hand it makes clear that salvation is achieved solely 'by grace [which] is not your own doing; it is the gift of God'.<sup>94</sup> A logical problem arises from the conflicting descriptions of the status of the will prior to salvation: man is both captive by sin<sup>95</sup> and

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<sup>92</sup> Grover A. Zinn, *Richard of St Victor* p. 32.

<sup>93</sup> Romans 3:22.

<sup>94</sup> Ephesians 2:8.

<sup>95</sup> Romans 7:6.

dead in his transgressions<sup>96</sup> but is somehow required actively to repent and turn away<sup>97</sup> from the deadness and imprisonment that is his own antecedent nature.

In considering whether the foregoing conflict is in fact a paradox—rather than a contradiction arising from the deficiency of language—I shall appeal to a range of poetical works, alongside theoretical explanations, that attempt an articulation of the struggle between autonomy and grace, and autonomy and sin. This is once again because art is perhaps better equipped to signify ‘impossible’ combinations than propositional discourse, since it is not bound by the constraints of logic, but is instead free to speak ambiguously and polysemously. Poetry may therefore signify a state that seems both inconsistent and true without needing to justify rationally how or why this is the case.

As in previous sections, in order to test the validity of my contention—that central tenets of Christian doctrine involve real and not merely apparent paradox—I shall begin by considering the ‘sed contra’—in this case, the possibility that there is no paradoxical dimension to the Christian conception of the will as argued by, for example, Calvin, who would not recognise the tensions of this paradox. Although we must of course allow for confessional differences, as a general principle Calvinism suggests that to maintain a concept of radical free will is to deny God’s omniscience, since it considers that God’s supreme foreknowledge limits the potentiality of human choice. Calvin writes: ‘[God] foresees future events only by reason of the fact that he decreed that they take place’.<sup>98</sup> Within Calvin’s account of soteriology, there is no real paradox between human willing and divine grace, since the believer who seeks God’s grace is already pre-destined to do so; likewise, those who choose to sin are not in that moment free to choose, but are determined to turn away from God.

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<sup>96</sup> Ephesians 2:1.

<sup>97</sup> Acts 3:19.

<sup>98</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion Volume II*, (ed.) John T. McNeil (London: Westminster PR, 1960), p. 945.

In contrast to Calvin's position, Augustine holds that God's foreknowledge does not force the future to happen.<sup>99</sup> Rather, his foreknowledge perfectly reflects and initiates the causal order in which human wills operate freely. And yet there is still a sense in which God's involvement in the world initiates the created order and also brings about all second-order, or intra-creational causes. Hence, Christianity appears to be claiming that divine causation and human causation paradoxically coincide; God can—incomprehensibly—cause man's free actions and yet allow them to remain entirely volitional.

Augustine argued against seeking a 'solution' to this contradiction by refusing to enter into what he believed was Cicero's false dichotomy: 'He [Cicero] constrains the religious soul to this dilemma, forcing it to choose between two propositions: either there is some scope for our will, or there is foreknowledge. He thinks that both cannot be true; to affirm one is to deny the other. If we choose foreknowledge, free will is annihilated; if we choose free will, prescience is abolished'.<sup>100</sup> Anselm supported Augustine's embrace of the co-existence of both poles and described the will of man as 'both slave and free'.<sup>101</sup> He explains: 'because it cannot return from sin, it is a slave; because it cannot be robbed of rectitude it is free'.<sup>102</sup> We can now discern the poles that constitute the paradox of man's will: on the one hand, his freedom to turn to God and the grace which compels him; and on the other his freedom to turn away from God and the sin that binds him. The central questions to be asked are: to what extent is man responsible for his own salvation? And is sin ever a choice?

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<sup>99</sup> 'The fact that God foreknew that a man would sin does not make a man sin; on the contrary, it cannot be doubted that it is the man himself who sins just because he whose prescience cannot be mistaken has foreseen that the man himself would sin. A man does not sin unless he wills to sin; and if he had willed not to sin, then God would have foreseen that refusal'. Augustine, *City of God*, p. 195.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 191.

<sup>101</sup> St. Anselm, 'On Free Will' in *The Major Works*, p. 189.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.



a) Turning to God

*Man shall not quite be lost, but sav'd who will,  
Yet not of will in him, but grace in me.*<sup>103</sup>

As Milton's God announces, a tension exists between the fallen nature of man and the Christian account of salvation, which considers man's free will as imperative in order to turn from his sinful nature to receive God's grace. The quotation tells us that only he who wills shall be saved, but emphasises the necessity and perhaps the primacy of God's grace. It is the moment of turning that seems to be paradoxical, since relationship with God is an apparently autonomous decision, yet it is only desired and further, only made possible, through God's prevenient grace. Anselm describes the logical problem of the Christian account of salvation: 'no one preserves this received uprightness without willing it. But no one can will it without having it. And no one can have it at all accept by grace'.<sup>104</sup> 'The question arises', Anselm acknowledges, 'from the fact that the Bible speaks at times as if that grace alone seems to avail for salvation and free choice not at all, but at other times as though our salvation entirely depends on free choice'.<sup>105</sup>

Repentance (μετανοέω) means to change one's mind, to turn actively away from, and this, it would seem, requires a re-orientation of the will. Repent is an active verb suggesting that the individual is not being acted upon from without, but is internally motivated: 'Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out'.<sup>106</sup> Here Peter's address demands action on behalf of the listeners. Paul's letter to the Romans likewise insists that righteousness comes 'through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe'.<sup>107</sup> As with Milton's God, Paul recognizes that man is 'sav'd who will', thus making it clear that man is responsible for his own salvation.

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<sup>103</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, (ed.) Christopher Ricks (New York: Penguin, 1968), bk. III 173-74.

<sup>104</sup> St. Anselm, 'De Concordia' in *The Major Works*, p. 456.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p. 452.

<sup>106</sup> Acts 3:19.

<sup>107</sup> Acts 3:22.

Whilst there is clarity in the plain assertion that metanoia is contingent on the will of the individual, we cannot ignore the second half of Milton's couplet: 'Yet not of will in him, but grace in me'. This begs the question—is the Christian concept of grace incompatible with free will? 'For by grace you have been saved', Paul writes to the Ephesians, 'And this is *not your own doing*; it is the *gift* of God'.<sup>108</sup> This would seem to suggest that God's role in salvation is sovereign and that man is fully reliant on his grace. The idea of salvation as a gift is a recurrent description in the Bible and carries the implicit connotation that the will of man is the latent recipient of divine graciousness, rather than an active, enabling force. The real force or the catalyst of salvific action is Christ, who acts on behalf of mankind. Paul tells the Romans, 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus'.<sup>109</sup> In this quotation we can identify God as the instigator and gift-giver, Christ as the catalyst, and man as the recipient. Again, there is internal coherence within this description if we leave aside the earlier evidence that Christianity preaches the significance of personal choice.

Yet, to add a further complication, we need to take account of Paul's observation that 'all have sinned' and as a result depend on God's gift of grace to save man from himself. R. A. Markus, commenting on Augustinian theology, describes the post-lapsarian condition as 'a *massa damnationis* from which no one can escape save by the divine gift of grace that cannot be requested'.<sup>110</sup> Markus appears to imply that man's free will is not free outside of relationship with God. The notion that sin might work against man's freedom creates an additional conundrum: do we sin volitionally or are we determined by our fallen impulses?

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<sup>108</sup> Ephesians 2:9 (my emphasis).

<sup>109</sup> Romans 3:23.

<sup>110</sup> A. H. Armstrong, *The Cambridge History of Latin, Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 484.

b) Turning away from God

*Oh wearisome condition of Humanity!  
Borne under one Law, to another bound:  
Vainely begot, and yet forbidden vanity,  
Created sicke, commanded to be sound.*<sup>111</sup>

Brooke's lament at the seemingly impossible situation of humanity articulates the confusion over the role of man's will in turning away from God, or in 'choosing' to sin. He describes the Fall as being born under the law of sin, of being bound to its disposition by inheritance, an idea that is given particular emphasis by using the poetic form. The rhyme scheme Brooke employs acts to impress his theological concern upon the reader; the link between 'humanity' and its innate condition of 'vanity' is uniquely brought to the surface in this poem as the rhyme and meter enhance the relationship between the two words. Augustine writes on a similar theme: 'even when we do see what is right and will to do it, we cannot do it because of the unruliness of our mortal inheritance',<sup>112</sup> thus indicating that *cupiditas* operates apart from the will and corrupts the decision to strive for what is pure. However, this same unruliness, according to Anselm, is itself the product of radical human freedom. 'The human race', he writes, 'fell into this helplessness precisely because it freely abandoned the state of justice'.<sup>113</sup> Hence, there seems to be a contradiction developing: through our free will we sin, and through sin we forfeit our free will.

In certain parts of the Bible one can find definite evidence to support the contention that man is not enslaved by sin, and his free will enables him to turn away from iniquity. Paul, for example, warns the Galatians, 'do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh',<sup>114</sup> which suggests that sin is a choice. Augustine likewise proposes that man's

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<sup>111</sup> Lord Brooke, 'Chorus Sacerdotum' in *The Metaphysical Poets*, (ed.) Helen Gardner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957), p. 36.

<sup>112</sup> St Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, p. 106. Augustine may be commenting on Romans 7:15. 'I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate'.

<sup>113</sup> St Anselm, 'De Concordia' in *The Major Works*, p. 462.

<sup>114</sup> Galatians 5:13.

fallen nature and his subsequent inordinate desire testifies that the will is indeed free. He writes: ‘Only its own will and free choice can make the mind a companion of cupidity’.<sup>115</sup> Augustine lists lust, greed and anger as examples of inordinate desires; man can be said to be acting out of cupidity when he surrenders to these impulses. One could suggest that these are external determining factors, corrupting the rational mind from outside. Augustine counters this attack on human autonomy though, arguing, ‘nothing can make the mind a slave to inordinate desire except its own will’,<sup>116</sup> endorsing the belief that man has a real choice to seek what is good or to embrace his cupidity. How, then, do we respond to the following passage?

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved.<sup>117</sup>

The problem seems to be that there is no motivation prior to the receipt of grace for man to turn towards God and away from the course of the world. If it is the case that outside of salvation man is in submission to a ‘yoke of slavery’<sup>118</sup> and held ‘captive’<sup>119</sup> by ‘the law of sin and death’,<sup>120</sup> how is it that he is free to choose to contradict his own ‘sicke’ nature and turn to God? Again we find an unlikely dual emphasis that on the one hand man has the opportunity to choose to follow God,<sup>121</sup> and on the other hand that man is chosen by God to be his follower.<sup>122</sup> Man is somehow required to choose to follow God’s path when

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<sup>115</sup> St Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, p. 17.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>117</sup> Ephesians 2:1- 5.

<sup>118</sup> Galatians 5:1.

<sup>119</sup> Romans 7: 6.

<sup>120</sup> Romans 8:2.

<sup>121</sup> Deuteronomy 30:19 ‘I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse, therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live’.

<sup>122</sup> Ephesians 1:4-5 ‘he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will’.

he is already on another course, a choice that God has predestined but from which man can turn away.

It is not enough simply to conclude that free choice often coexists and co-operates with grace. Nor is soteriology purely linear in the sense that man, using first his will must turn to God, who only then pours out his grace. Instead, it seems necessary for Christianity to affirm that both free will and grace co-exist within the nature of man, and although there is an element of contrary logic in the suggestion that fallen man, with inordinate intent would desire grace, before knowing grace, this contradiction seems indispensable. Anselm remains emphatic that ‘grace always aids one’s innate free choice’.<sup>123</sup> Here, Anselm understands grace as both the path to and the destination of relationship with God.

John Donne’s ‘Holy Sonnet’ contains strong language of contradiction and rapture, conveying the sensation that true freedom is born of a sort of divine ‘bondage’: ‘Take me to you, imprison mee, for I / Except you’enthral mee, never shall be free, / Nor ever chaste, except you ravish mee’.<sup>124</sup> The Bible testifies to this paradoxical sentiment. Paul, for example, speaks of being ‘set free from sin, [to] become slaves of righteousness’,<sup>125</sup> and declares he is ‘going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit’.<sup>126</sup> This use of the verb ‘constrained’—(*deō*) meaning ‘to bind, tie or constrain’—is similar in its overtones to Donne’s experience of rapture, a baffling freedom in chains through God’s grace that is resistible and ineluctable. It would seem, then, that the Christian understanding of man’s will as at once both bound and free is indeed a paradox, in which man freely wills what his fallen nature prevents.

To summarise our discussion, we have witnessed two paradoxes that emerge in a faithful examination of Christian teachings on the will. Firstly, we noted how the Bible

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<sup>123</sup> St Anselm, ‘De Concordia’ in *The Major Works*, p. 455.

<sup>124</sup> John Donne, ‘Holy Sonnet’ in *The Metaphysical Poets*, p. 84.

<sup>125</sup> Romans 6:18.

<sup>126</sup> Acts 20:22-23.

insists that sin is always a choice, whilst Paul also acknowledges the ineluctable pull of *cupiditas*. Secondly, we observed the tension that exists between God's overwhelming, irresistible grace and the importance attached to salvation as a free and personal choice. Given the central significance of both sin and salvation in Christian doctrine, we are dealing with vital tensions for the believer, not merely meaningless contradictions which could be solved if we were to relinquish one side of the paradox. To override the contradictory status one must either downplay the reality of sin or negate the sovereign force of grace, neither option of which Christianity appears to endorse. There seems to be no alternative which satisfies both classical logic and orthodox Christianity, thus by virtue of its deviance from the law of non-contradiction, the Christian notion of the will is most accurately described in paradoxical terms.

#### **vii) Space: Everywhere and Nowhere**

The depiction of space in Christian theology is another area that seems to involve several logically incompatible aspects. Firstly, there is the belief that God is the extrinsic author of space, who remains external to the dimension whilst also dwelling within it. Secondly, that the same God, who abides nowhere and everywhere, entered and embodied human space in the specific incarnate form of Christ. And thirdly, Christianity endorses the belief that one can choose to enter into God's presence and at the same time acknowledge his inescapable omnipresence. As in our previous examples, the breach with the law of non-contradiction seems explicit and 'incurably so'. The claim is less rationally problematic if the Bible is viewed entirely poetically, the event of the Cross symbolically, and the Holy Spirit as a purely imaginative aid. However, the case for paradox surfaces if one insists, as many Christian traditions do, on God's actual physical presence, be it in the Eucharist, the person of Christ or the heart of an individual. The primary question that

these apparently paradoxical statements about divine space provoke fixes on the location of God: where is he?

The Bible speaks at times of God's spatial transcendence—'The LORD is exalted for he dwells on high'<sup>127</sup>—and at other times of his immanent relationship with creation, 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man'.<sup>128</sup> If either one of these aspects is under-emphasised it becomes possible to dispense with the paradoxical character of divine space. If, however, the duality is upheld, then Christianity would seem to be claiming that God as Christ appeared in human space, whilst as creator, God exists in no space, and simultaneously, as Spirit he inhabits in every space. The paradox of divine spaces thus appears to be threefold, and for the sake of clarity I will deal with each instance individually.

a) God is outside space and inside space

God as the creator is described in Genesis as producing 'an expanse'<sup>129</sup> from an absence of form, and causing earth to emerge and situate itself from out of the void. From this we understand that God is the cause of all space and as such he is prior to space; that is to say he has existence independent of the dimension, and exceeds even heaven, insofar as it is conceived of as spatial. When speaking of the Christian God, we therefore understand this to be a God whom 'heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain',<sup>130</sup> who is 'Most High' and 'does not dwell in houses made by hands'.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Isaiah 33:5.

<sup>128</sup> Revelation 21:3.

<sup>129</sup> 'And God said, 'Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters and let it separate the waters that were under the expanse from the waters that were above the expanse' Genesis 1:6. The Hebrew for 'expanse' is 'rakia' indicating an extended surface. It is sometimes translated as 'horizon' or 'firmament'.

<sup>130</sup> 2 Chronicles 6:18.

<sup>131</sup> Acts 7:47-48.

On the other hand, if we consider God as creator in relation to his creation, it would seem that his involvement is necessarily intimate and imminent. In a panentheistic sense God is ‘excessively’ spatial insofar as every grain of creation is completely full of godliness, even though his presence exceeds it. Catherine Pickstock helpfully explains that ‘although God is not in a place for He is infinite, He is not non-spatial, for He situates sites themselves. And therefore He is the eminent (or pre-eminent) space of preoccupation which gives space its job in advance of itself’.<sup>132</sup> From this we learn that it is proper to speak of God’s spatial identity in his continual situation of space and the ineluctable imprint of the Creator upon his creation.

Perhaps, then, we are speaking of a God who is supra-spatial, who through the act of creation has embedded himself in every space and yet, as the Scriptures assert, is not contained within any space? This conception is complicated further if we bear in mind that his involvement in created space is not only as the abstract force behind creation and as the invisible occupant of all space, but also as the personal God who enters into covenants with his creation. God, the Bible seems to affirm, dwells nowhere, everywhere, and uniquely with man: ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God’.<sup>133</sup> We witness in this verse God’s promise to situate himself in a personal way within the creation which he both transcends and immaterially dwells within.

b) God who is everywhere and nowhere is incarnate in the specific person of Christ.

Within Christian theology, God’s promise to dwell with man has the additional paradoxical dimension of dwelling *as* man: ‘For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells

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<sup>132</sup> Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 229.

<sup>133</sup> Revelation 21:3.



bodily'.<sup>134</sup> Here, and as we saw earlier, the New Testament makes clear that the Incarnation does not simply involve a part of the transcendent divine Spirit becoming temporarily involved in humanity, but rather the 'whole fullness of deity' eternally incarnate. This leads to the teaching that the Incarnation has eternal standing, without subtracting from the complete divinity of God as creator. Augustine describes the paradox thus: 'He didn't depart from heaven, when he came down to us from there; nor did he depart from us, when he ascended into heaven again. I mean, he was still there while he was here'.<sup>135</sup> The logical problem of Christological space seems to have emerged as a matter of the modality of presence. Christianity, as noted previously, succumbs to Arianism if it denies the spatial existence of the divine nature in the person of Christ, but at the same time Christians continue to worship God in his transcendent Spirit-mode.

Something of this logical contradiction is staged in Southwell's poem 'New Heaven, New Warre': 'Come kiss the maunger where he lies / This is your bliss above the skies'.<sup>136</sup> 'This is your bliss' writes Southwell, emphasising that the Christ child is no mere representation but divine bliss itself. Southwell's poetic description involves the surreal stretching of the deitic 'this' to encompass an infinity at once elsewhere, 'above the clouds' *and* present in the manger. It is a vivid and precise dramatisation of the paradox, which refuses to play down either the divinity of the incarnate Christ or the immanent transcendence of the creator, who as Augustine reminds us was 'there whilst he was here'.

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<sup>134</sup> Colossians 2:9-10.

<sup>135</sup> St. Augustine, *Sermons: On the Liturgical Seasons*, (ed.) John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill (New York: City Press, 1993), III 7:263, p. 219.

<sup>136</sup> R. Southwell, 'New Heaven, New Warre' in *The Metaphysical Poets*, p. 40.

- c) It is possible to enter into the presence of an omnipresent God

In addition to divine space understood as both a specific incarnation and as a transcendent beyond, Christians also believe that God has omnipresence in the world. This means there is no space that is outside God. The psalmist describes the inescapability of God's omnipresence:

Where shall I go from your Spirit?  
Or where shall I flee from your presence?  
If I ascend to heaven, you are there!  
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!<sup>137</sup>

In these lines the believer describes God's omnipresence as sovereign no matter where the individual is (both in a physical and a spiritual sense). This would indicate that there are no degrees of God's nearness and that there is no qualitative distinction in his spatial extension. This in turn appears to suggest that God is equally present in the saint as in the sinner. Nevertheless, Paul's prayer for the Ephesians is that they 'may be filled with all the fullness of God',<sup>138</sup> thus suggesting that it is indeed possible to experience different gradations of God's presence. Paul reminds the Ephesians they 'were *separated* from Christ, *alienated* from the commonwealth of Israel and *strangers* to the covenants of promise, having no hope and *without God* in the world'. He explains how 'in Christ' those 'who once were *far off* have been *brought near*'.<sup>139</sup> The varying distances between man and God dominate his language. It may of course be the case that Paul is simply describing a spiritual distance using the metaphorical language of physical distance. However, could it also be that there is some metaphysical correlate between the dimensions of spirit and space? This begs the further question, is the spiritual realm in any sense spatial?

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<sup>137</sup> Psalm 139:7-8.

<sup>138</sup> Ephesians 3:19.

<sup>139</sup> Ephesians 2:12-13 (my emphasis).

Certainly, orthodox Christianity distances itself from gnosticism by insisting that the physical body is a dwelling place for the spirit of God.<sup>140</sup> Hence, when talking about human spiritual nearness there is some warrant to suggest that this entails physical involvement. Hopkins depicts something of the spiritual occupation of physical space in his poem, 'As Kingfishers Catch Fire': 'For Christ plays in ten thousand places, / Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his'.<sup>141</sup> Once more, we find an emphasis on the physical presence of God's Spirit. Hopkins' depiction of Christ 'playing' in human limbs connotes movement and vitality; there is a sense of both Puck *and* Ariel in Hopkins' Christ, a sort of elemental spirit, who is at once both an 'airy spirit'<sup>142</sup> and a 'merry wanderer'.<sup>143</sup> A close reading of Hopkins' poem might also pick up on the absent or elided copula in the phrase 'lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his'. 'Lovely', as an adjective, implies a missing 'he is' and in the omission of the copulative verb, the lines stage a passing over from 'plays' to an inferred but unsignified 'is'. One of the effects of this literary device is that it subtly figures a mode of presence 'without being'. This reading complicates what perhaps at first glance seems like Christ acting as a puppeteer, giving the illusion of life in otherwise motionless limbs. For, by eliding the predicative verb, Hopkins invests Christ with a more subtle presence in the lives of individuals, participating in and sharing their experience, whilst in some sense simultaneously remaining beyond them, rather than dominating or controlling their motion.

However we interpret the nuances of Hopkins' imagery, the poem ultimately illustrates the biblical teaching that God is crucially involved in particular space and dwells *with* man and *in* man. Yet, this is only one aspect of the Christian description of divine space for, as we have seen, the multifarious portrayals in the Bible suggest that it is

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<sup>140</sup> 'Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you'. 1 Corinthians 6:19.

<sup>141</sup> Hopkins, 'As Kingfishers catch fire' in *The Poems of Gerald Manley Hopkins*, (eds.) W. H. Gardner and N. H. MacKenzie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 90.

<sup>142</sup> Shakespeare's description of 'Ariel' in the Dramatis Personae of *The Tempest*.

<sup>143</sup> William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act 2 Sc 1.

possible to ‘come into [the] presence’<sup>144</sup> of a god who ‘fill[s] heaven and earth’.<sup>145</sup> The Scriptures tell us we can be separated from God and yet we cannot escape him; that he dwells fully beyond heaven and completely within man; and that as pure spirit he sustains us physically.

As with the preceding instances, I am not making the case that God’s extension in the universe is an ultimate paradox. Rather, I am saying that from an anthropocentric perspective the Christian depiction of divine space inevitably has this appearance. Catherine Pickstock helpfully identifies ‘apparently oxymoronic combinations’ as ‘a definitive feature of liturgical space’.<sup>146</sup> She describes the goal of the liturgical journey as ‘simultaneously attained and postponed, before and after, within and without, ‘to hand’ and distant’. Pickstock does not present this as a logical problem that needs to be solved, but rather as the ‘radiant and excessive structure of divine space’, which she believes ‘defamiliarize[s] mundane topologies’.<sup>147</sup> I think the word ‘defamiliarize’ is vital here, as it suggests that when considering how our conception of space corresponds to aspects of divinity, it is necessary to accept that human perspective and human understanding is limited, and not to assume that our customary perspective is the ultimate or exhaustive viewpoint.

Paradox, as we have seen, is a necessary description of divine space if we are to speak of the multi-faceted spatial depictions of God without sidelining or over-emphasising certain aspects. Perhaps Christianity, more so than any other religion, cannot avoid encountering tensions when considering God’s manifestation in the universe because of the affirmation that the same God who is transcendent spirit has become God incarnate. Trevor Hart forcefully affirms that central to the Christian message is that ‘God

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<sup>144</sup> Psalm 95:2.

<sup>145</sup> Jeremiah 23:24.

<sup>146</sup> Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing*, p. 229.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

has “taken flesh” and given himself to be known in faith’.<sup>148</sup> That is to say, God has given himself to be known in space and in corpus. He is named Immanuel, meaning God ‘with’ or ‘in the midst’ of us. When Christ ascends to the heavenly realm he assures his disciples ‘I am always with you, to the end of the age’,<sup>149</sup> whilst affirming that at the same time he is seated at the right hand of the Father.

Drawing this section to a close, we have identified three main areas of spatial complexity and discussed in greater depth why Christianity insists on retaining positions that seem to contradict each other. The Bible testifies to God’s presence both in the world *and* outside the world, both in Christ *and* in man. These tensions importantly allow Christians to speak of God’s transcendence *and* his immanence. Hence, when Christians describe entering God’s presence the expression is more than just figurative, the Incarnation testifies to a physical God, one who dwells fully in the human body of Christ, one who enters into, and animates his creation whilst not being intrinsically spatial or limited to any co-ordinate. Pickstock’s account of the liturgy’s figuring of a perspective outside our quotidian conception of space indicates the limitations of the human vantage point and this has prompted us to suggest that our sense of spatial possibility is a provisional, this-worldly perspective. That is not to say it is wrong, merely that it is necessary to acknowledge a difference between God’s ultimate vantage point and our limited one. To return to de Lubac we might conclude that this dichotomy follows inevitably from the belief that ‘proper view always eludes us’.<sup>150</sup> To assume, as logic dictates, that the regulative principles of space governing our experience must apply absolutely and in all instances would lead to the restriction of God’s omnipresent spirit and the sacrifice of several of God’s integral manifest modes. Christians must therefore be prepared to suggest that our common-sense comprehension of spatial properties does

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<sup>148</sup> Trevor Hart, *Through the Arts: Hearing, Seeing and Touching the Truth* in J. Begbie, (ed.) *Beholding the Glory: Incarnation Through the Arts* (London: Darton, Longmann & Todd, 2000), p. 3.

<sup>149</sup> Matthew 28:20.

<sup>150</sup> Henri de Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith*, p. 9.

not provide an exhaustive perspective, and that in some instances paradoxical both/and expressions come closer to an accurate representation of divine reality.

### **viii) The Kingdom: Already and Not Yet**

The final significant example of Christian doctrine that presents what seems to be an impossible combination of contraries concerns the institution of the Kingdom of God. The New Testament teaches, on the one hand, that God's sovereignty is already manifest, and on the other hand that the full establishment of God's supreme reign is yet to come. The paradox of the Kingdom of God also involves the conviction that through salvation Christians participate both in the already *and* in the not yet. This is expressed by Kierkegaard in his assertion that 'man is [...] a synthesis of the temporal and the eternal'.<sup>151</sup> Having just addressed the central spatial paradoxes of Christianity, the now and not-yet status of the Kingdom can be understood in some sense as the principal temporal paradox.

It might be possible to avoid logical difficulties if we describe the parallel existence of two separate time frames, one in which the Kingdom of God is established 'now' and one in which it is 'yet to come'. This is not so much a paradoxical temporality, rather a co-existent duality. C. S. Lewis expresses such an idea analogically in his Narnia chronicles. Lucy observes: 'However long we seemed to have lived in Narnia, when we got back through the wardrobe it seemed to have taken no time at all [...] once you're out of Narnia, you have no idea how Narnian time is passing'.<sup>152</sup> This depicts a reality where there are two distinct temporal dimensions that exist in parallel, sometimes the children participate in one, sometimes the other. However, this analogy is not quite accurate because the children can only be in one or the other at any given time. If we heed

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<sup>151</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 85.

<sup>152</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair in The Chronicles of Narnia* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), p. 330.

Kierkegaard's description of man as a '*synthesis* of the temporal and the eternal', it would seem that the Christian participates in *both* time frames simultaneously, experiencing the not-yet within the already.

In a similar manner, we could speculate on a duality of kingdoms and suggest that the Kingdom of God exists in its own eternal realm, but is 'not yet' manifest on earth. The theological problem encountered with a sole emphasis on the other-worldly nature of the Kingdom, is that it confines the eternal Kingdom to a perpetual 'not yet'. This construal enters into the same linguistic trap articulated by White Queen in *Through the Looking-Glass* when she offers Alice 'jam every other day'. "'It *must* come sometimes 'jam to-day,'"' Alice objected. "No, it ca'n't," said the Queen. "It's jam every *other* day: to-day isn't any *other* day, you know"''.<sup>153</sup> Roger Holmes both affirms and opposes the Queen's staunch denial that jam can ever arrive. He explains 'by its nature tomorrow must come, also by its very definition it can never come. The Queen promises Alice jam, but tells her in the same words that she can never have it! Here is one of the famous paradoxes connected with time'.<sup>154</sup> 'Can we ever have jam in the todayness of tomorrow?' Holmes asks, and answers both yes and no. Similarly, the paradox phrased in theological terms asks: 'Can we ever have the Kingdom of God in the not-yetness of today?' Likewise, the answer appears to be both affirmative and negative, hence we are dealing with a unity of two distinct time-frames, situated both in the world and not in the world. Let us now take each component of the paradox separately in order to see if either aspect can dispensed with or de-emphasised.

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<sup>153</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*, p. 150.

<sup>154</sup> Roger W. Holmes 'The Philosopher's Alice in Wonderland' in *Aspects of Alice* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 215.

a) The Kingdom of God is now

The Bible appears to speak patently of the arrival and actual presence of the Kingdom of heaven manifest presently on earth. Jesus describes God's Kingdom as not only 'near'<sup>155</sup> but also 'at hand'<sup>156</sup> and as already 'come upon'<sup>157</sup> those whom he has healed. Christians claim that the supreme reign of the Kingdom of God is experienced now, even *before* the event of the Parousia. The belief that Christians already share in the awaited vision is not dressed up in the language of gnosticism but seen as a real immanent manifestation.<sup>158</sup> 'We therefore have to understand', urges Moltmann, 'the liberating activity of God as the immanence of the eschatological kingdom of God, and the coming of the kingdom as the transcendence of the present lordship of God'.<sup>159</sup> One of the most significant verses in support of this describes the situation of the Kingdom as having already arrived, unseen, 'in the midst' of man: 'Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, he answered them 'The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed, nor will they say, "Look, here it is!" or "There!" for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you'.<sup>160</sup>

b) The Kingdom of God is not yet

Whilst it has been shown that the Bible speaks at times as if the Kingdom of heaven is already constituted on earth, there seems to be equal stress given to the contrary claim that the consummation of the Kingdom is still a future event, and that it is an

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<sup>155</sup> Luke 10:9 'Heal the sick and say "the Kingdom of God has come near to you"'.  
<sup>156</sup> 'The time is here, the kingdom of God is at hand' Mark 1:15

<sup>157</sup> 'But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you'. Matthew 12:28

<sup>158</sup> 'The christophanies were not interpreted as mystical translations into a world beyond. They were viewed as radiance thrown ahead of itself, the radiance of God's coming glory on the first day of the new world's creation. And these christophanies are daylight visions, not phantasms of the night'. J. Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), p. 219.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>160</sup> Luke 17:20-21.



eschatological glory, not yet visible in its fullness. ‘*Then comes the end,*’ Paul writes, ‘when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule, every authority and power’.<sup>161</sup> Reinforcing this, Christians may point to the continuance of poverty, illness, death and war as evidence that the Kingdom of God is not yet established, since the Bible promises the end of all these sufferings. Perhaps most significantly, Christ instructs his followers in the Lord’s Prayer which includes the phrase: ‘your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven’.<sup>162</sup> Here, we see again a demarcation between how things will be and how things currently are, a schism, it seems, between the Kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of earth, demonstrating that the richness and vitality of God’s Kingdom has yet to come.

The teachings concerning the shape of the Kingdom of God also have paradoxical character,<sup>163</sup> for they reverse or invert commonplace assumptions concerning human ideas of precedence.<sup>164</sup> For example, Christ’s caution: ‘Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it’.<sup>165</sup> In reference to the salvation of man, this is the suggestion that the losing of life is not a temporal instant but a perpetual sinking into eternity and rising again into the midst of linear time. The conflation of time and eternity is intrinsically Christological in the sense that ‘time is the form chosen by Christ (and thus adequate) for manifesting the true eternity’.<sup>166</sup> Therefore, if the Kingdom of God is experienced as ‘already and not yet’, so too is the belief in salvation: man is already saved, but the fullness of his salvation is awaited eschatologically. Man, it seems,

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<sup>161</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:24; See also 2 Peter 1:10-11 and Matthew 7:21.

<sup>162</sup> Matthew 6:10.

<sup>163</sup> This is a significant theme in Cameron Freeman’s recent book *Post-Metaphysics and the Paradoxical Teachings of Jesus*. He emphasizes how Christ’s teachings contravene Aristotelian logic. He writes: ‘The language of paradox is post-metaphysical in that it requires none of the traditional metaphysical postulates of the Western philosophical tradition. Cameron Freeman, *Post-Metaphysics and the Paradoxical Teachings of Jesus: The Structure of the Real* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2010), p. 6.

<sup>164</sup> Cf. Luke 14:11; Romans 6:18; 1 Corinthians 3:18.

<sup>165</sup> Matthew 10:39.

<sup>166</sup> Hans Von Balthasar, *La Theologie de l’Histoire*, quoted in Ronald W. Hepburn, *Christianity and Paradox*, p. 76.

is saved from this world, in order to take his place in that same world, just as God's Kingdom is 'not of this world',<sup>167</sup> and at the same time 'in the midst'<sup>168</sup> of it.

This paradox is summarised in the declaration that the heavenly Kingdom has thus arrived in full and yet remains veiled, and Christians in a state of constant rejoicing and simultaneous anticipation. The Kingdom yet to come is frequently anticipated as arriving from without, and whilst this is in some sense an accurate depiction, it has also emerged that this ultimate vision will come from within, as a centrifugal force, in a world created and sustained by God, but fallen in every respect. Moltmann writes: 'The Gospel does not merely bring the kingdom of God to the poor; it also discovers the kingdom of the poor which is God's kingdom'.<sup>169</sup> From this perspective, the Kingdom of heaven illumines what is already on earth, which further emphasises the paradoxical character of the 'already' and 'not-yet' world.

The conclusion of this section can be summarised by Moltmann's description of 'this last of days' as 'also the dawn of the new creation',<sup>170</sup> a dawn that rises on the old creation, illuminating the old and dispelling darkness so that the city of man is transformed into the Kingdom of God both from within and without. As we have seen, Christians claim a current access to these future spiritual gifts, further testifying that the church preaches the 'already' in what is still a 'not yet' world. To speak of God's Kingdom in non-contradictory terms seems to involve covering up or skirting around a multiplicity of biblical passages, which are in tension with one another. Aristotelian logic tells us that either the Kingdom has come, or it has not—it cannot both be present and absent as this paradox maintains. Yet, as we have seen, Christians believe that through Christ they gain access to a recovered paradise whilst recognising that at the same time they live in a fallen world and as such are under the many limitations to that beatific

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<sup>167</sup> John 18:36.

<sup>168</sup> Luke 17:21.

<sup>169</sup> J Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, p. 100.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 327.

vision. Therefore a faithful articulation of the Kingdom of God involves a departure from common-sense temporality and an acceptance of a paradoxical both/and timeframe whereby one can hold the ‘already’ together with the ‘not yet’.

### **Conclusion: The Wait for Synthesis**

It seems, from the foregoing discussion, that paradox is necessary and central to a faithful account of Christian doctrine. In each case, it was shown that the paradox was not a poetic description, or linguistic contradiction, but rather an attempt to hold together two contrary ideas. We may thus legitimately endorse Stenson’s claim that ‘paradox characterizes the language of religion’,<sup>171</sup> and affirm that the law of non-contradiction does not always hold in theological territory. This leaves us with several options. Firstly, we could conclude that Aristotelian logic is true in all instances, and believe therefore that Christianity is false since it transgresses important logical maxims. Secondly, we might determine that the laws of logic are wrong and ought to be overturned in the face of the existence of central theological paradoxes. As a third alternative, we could propose that both the law of non-contradiction and Christianity are true and suggest that paradoxes demonstrate not that Aristotelian logic or Christian teachings are wrong, but that human understanding is partial and limited.

This third possibility would be accepted by de Lubac who describes paradox as ‘the search or wait for synthesis’, this, he believes, is ‘the provisional expression of a view which remains incomplete, but whose orientation is towards fullness’.<sup>172</sup> As we mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the emphasis on future completion suggests that religious paradox is an attempt to express faithfully the inexpressible, accepting that the ‘dark glass’ of perception is sufficient for now, because of the promise of a future

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<sup>171</sup> Sten H. Stenson, *Sense and Nonsense in Religion*, p. 39.

<sup>172</sup> Henri de Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith*, p. 9.

unveiled relationship.<sup>173</sup> Paradox can thus be seen as a celebration of what is presently known and a testimony that there is more to come.

Such a conclusion might in some ways seem unsatisfactory given the human impulse for certainty and immediate understanding; nevertheless, it seems in many ways an accurate reflection of the current human condition. Paul describes our situation as a ‘groaning’ after synthesis.<sup>174</sup> He explains that although we ‘groan inwardly’ we must ‘wait eagerly’ for the hope that is promised. This characterises the paradoxical nature of Christian reality in which we and the whole creation are groaning after a synthesis which has in one sense been made though is still yet to come. Therefore, the affirmation of paradox in Christianity is a sign of trust in the continual revelation of God’s plan for mankind.

An overarching concern in this chapter has been to discredit the assumption that the Christian ought to cover up or modify logically problematic elements of faith on the basis that logical credibility is the only measure of truth. By viewing paradox as the most accurate way to express truths that remain partly veiled, we do not have to negate the validity of logic, in fact, if we hold the law of non-contradiction in tension with Christian paradoxes, this disconnect becomes its own signpost testifying that ‘the synthesis of the world has not been made’.<sup>175</sup> We are thus accepting that paradoxes transgress the boundary of logical conceivability, but suggesting that paradox is nevertheless the best way we can understand on earth certain harmonies of the Kingdom of heaven, which for now we see darkly and must therefore await an eschatological light.

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<sup>173</sup> Cf. 1 John 3:2.

<sup>174</sup> For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons’. Romans 8:22-23.

<sup>175</sup> Henri de Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith*, p. 10.



## **Chapter Two: The Anarchic**

The preceding chapter on paradox revealed a particular tendency within literary nonsense to defy the law of non-contradiction by uniting opposites and transgressing logical principles. This act of transgression gestures towards a strong element of conflict present within the nonsensical. Jeffrey Stern describes Carroll's frequent recourse to opposition and contradiction as a 'rebellious framework'. Stern gestures to the barefaced conflict of 'nonsense against sense, the dream against the mundane, Wonderland against Victorian England, and so on'.<sup>1</sup> Stern's proposal that the basic framework of the *Alice* books is structured by rebellion invites us to consider the prevalence of this theme. The fact that both stories end with Alice's revolt against the prevailing power supports the theory that there is a significant sense of rebellion or anarchy present in the narrative structure of both stories.<sup>2</sup>

### **i) Nonsense and Anarchy**

How can we characterize this theme of conflict and defiance? Donald Gray observes that there is 'now an orthodox interest of twentieth-century readers in the subversive and anarchic qualities of [Carroll's] writing'.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Donald Rackin's extensive study of the *Alice* novels has led him to promote the anarchic as a central concept. Rackin describes the 'literal anarchy of Alice's adventures and the metaphysical and moral

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey Stern, 'Lewis Carroll the Surrealist', in *Lewis Carroll: A Celebration*, (ed.) Guiliano E. (New York: Potter, 1982), p. 133.

<sup>2</sup> *Alice in Wonderland* ends with Alice overturning the jury stands and knocking down the playing card court: 'Hold your tongue!' said the Queen, turning purple. 'I won't!' said Alice [...] 'You're nothing but a pack of cards!' *Alice in Wonderland*, p. 97. In *Through the Looking-Glass* she demolishes the royal banquet crying: "'I ca'n't stand this any longer!" she cried, as she jumped up and seized the tablecloth with both hands: one good pull, and plates, dishes, guests, and candles came crashing down together in a heap on the floor'. *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*, p. 204.

<sup>3</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, Preface, viii.

anarchy they encapsulate'.<sup>4</sup> At face value, the word 'anarchy' seems to capture something of nonsensical conflict and rebellion, but is this a precise and accurate usage?

The word 'anarchy' derives from the Greek *αν* 'without' and *αρχι* meaning 'leader' or 'ruler'. Peter Marshall in *A History of Anarchism* defines the modern usage of the term in accordance with the original Greek: 'to describe the condition of a people living without any constituted authority'.<sup>5</sup> The idea that authority is un-constituted seems to convey accurately how power works in Alice's worlds. It is not that she encounters a lack of authority figures,<sup>6</sup> but rather that she finds those in the possession of power frequently have their authority undercut, mocked or deconstructed.<sup>7</sup> It would seem, then, that Carroll's nonsense worlds are anarchic in a literal sense, in that they consistently disestablish the constituted power of those in authority.

Yet it is not only in relation to the characters and narrative that the *Alice* stories involve anarchy. There also seems to be a case for suggesting that the reader experiences a type of imaginative anarchy in the willed suspension of conventional logic. Robert Polhemus believes that a governing principle of Carroll's fantasy worlds involves 'considering things from the very opposite of the conventional point of view'.<sup>8</sup> This diversion from convention is further emphasised by Cohen when he addresses the question of what, if anything, the *Alice* books mean and concludes: 'To understand what they mean, we have to realize that Wonderland and the world behind the looking-glass

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<sup>4</sup> Donald Rackin 'Blessed Rage: Lewis Carroll and the Modern Quest for Order' in *Alice in Wonderland*, Norton Critical Edition, p. 403.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism* (London: Fontana Press, 1993), p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> In fact, the reverse seems to be the case; Cohen acknowledges that 'Wonderland is, in fact, overpopulated with downright tyrants, heartless figures of authority. Besides the Queen of Hearts, we have the Caterpillar, the Hatter, the Duchess, the Red Queen, and even Humpty Dumpty—all vying for first prize'. Morton N. Cohen, *Lewis Carroll: A Biography* (London: Papermac, 1995), p. 335.

<sup>7</sup> For example, in *Through the Looking-Glass*, the reader is encouraged by Tenniel's illustration to ridicule the tiny, indignant White King, and also by Alice's exclamation: 'Oh! *Please* don't make such faces, my dear!' [...] 'You make me laugh so that I can hardly hold you!' Even at the first entrance of the Queen of Hearts Alice is unfazed by the royal procession stating: 'why, they're only a pack of cards, after all. I needn't be afraid of them!' Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, p. 63.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Polhemus 'Play, Nonsense, and Games: Comic Diversion' in *Alice in Wonderland*, Norton Critical Edition, p. 370.

are mysterious places where characters do not live by conventional rules and that meaning does not play a conventional role. Even the laws of nature, the law of gravity for instance, do not work as they should'.<sup>9</sup> The reader, like Alice, has to imagine how to pass a cake round first and cut it up afterwards.

The point here is simply that fundamental to the reading of the stories is the reader's capacity to think in terms that contradict or unsettle the governing principles of the familiar world. The reader must walk with Alice in the opposite direction to her destination in order to arrive there. Unlike many other fantasies where there is a single instance of suspension of everyday logic, Carroll's stories require the reader to enter into an enchanted world, whose narrative authority is recurrently disrupted. With a sudden jolt Alice is transported from a shop to a rowing boat. Once this activity is established 'the oars, and the boat, and the river, had vanished all in a moment and she was back again in the little dark shop'.<sup>10</sup> We can find no constituted norms that govern her adventures; a pig could turn into a baby, but then again it might not. Rackin believes that Alice pines for 'some familiar signposts of intelligible order',<sup>11</sup> but this is denied her. There is 'no *telos*, no final goal or ultimate "meaning" [...] their games are essentially ruleless, circular, and without end—games undoubtedly for "mad people"'.<sup>12</sup> This radical degree of instability supports the description of the stories as having an anarchic character in the sense that her encounters are without any permanent or discernible authority and the reader too, like Alice, must try to adjust to a world without any 'intelligible order'.

At this point we find that nonsense literature has challenged fundamental empirical assumptions such as 'I can trust my senses' or 'I can verify what is real'. In Tigges' anthology of nonsense, Lisa Ede makes a similar case for an anarchic interpretation of nonsense literature on the basis that 'because the nonsense world is a

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<sup>9</sup> Morton N. Cohen, *Lewis Carroll: A Biography*, p. 143.

<sup>10</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, pp. 157-158.

<sup>11</sup> Donald Rackin, 'Blessed Rage: Lewis Carroll and the Modern Quest for Order', p. 399.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 400.



play world, it exists apart from society [...] yet, it sometimes even questions the “reality” of the “real” world itself”.<sup>13</sup> The anarchy involved in questioning the reality of the real world seems to resemble certain aspects of Christian belief which dispute established claims about the nature of reality, such as: death is the end of life and humans cannot walk on water. Indeed, Robert Polhemus has suggested that ‘Lewis Carroll’s words and images are to the formulation of a comic faith what Jesus’s parables are to Christian doctrine: they create a fiction so radical that it can bring its audience to look with fresh wonder at the structure and meaning of experience’.<sup>14</sup> In this chapter, I want to explore whether Christian teaching does in fact unsettle constitutional norms and provoke its followers to question the nature of the real as it appears to us. Before doing so, however, we first need to consider in detail whether anarchy is in any sense an apposite theological descriptor, for this language of riot and rebellion whilst suited to nonsense might seem to some to be the very antithesis of Christian faith.

## ii) Christianity and Anarchy

There is undoubtedly a sense of incongruity elicited by the conjunction of the words ‘Christianity’ and ‘anarchism’. The familiar anarchist slogan encapsulates this discord: ‘Neither God nor Master’.<sup>15</sup> The apparent inconsonance derives from the assumption that Christianity is about observing rules and anarchism is about breaking them. The traditional depiction of God as an authoritarian father-figure is anathema to many anarchists. Equally, anarchism is often seen as disorderly and aggressive, which is

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<sup>13</sup> Lisa Ede, ‘An Introduction to the Nonsense Literature of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll’ in *Explorations in the Field of Nonsense*, (ed.) Wim Tigges (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1987), p. 60.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Polhemus ‘Play, Nonsense, and Games: Comic Diversion’ in *Alice in Wonderland*, Norton Critical Edition, p. 365.

<sup>15</sup> This phrase was coined by the socialist Auguste Blanqui in 1880, when he published a journal entitled: ‘Neither God nor Master’. It became an anarchist slogan when it was later used by Mikael Bakunin.

removed from a Christian view of compassionate citizenship and the hierarchical order of heaven.

Whilst this sense of incongruity is obviously not without foundation, there are nevertheless a variety of thinkers for whom the union of Christianity and anarchism is both fitting and significant. The Christian anarchist Jacques Ellul explains: ‘The more I understood seriously the Biblical message in its entirety [...] the more I came to see how impossible it is to give simple obedience to the state and how there is in the Bible the orientation to a certain anarchism’.<sup>16</sup> Peter Marshall, likewise, points out that ‘Christian anarchism is not an attempt to synthesize two systems of thought but rather an attempt to realize the message of the Gospels’.<sup>17</sup> My aim in this chapter is to explore whether there is any biblical support for suggesting that Christianity exhibits the type of anarchy identified in Carroll’s nonsense—an unsettling of common-place assumptions about the nature of the real.

A similar sense of unsettling common-place assumptions can be found in the writing of the Russian Christian anarchist Nicholas Berdyaev (1874-1948). In this chapter I do not attempt to prove or oppose Berdyaev’s theology; instead, my aim is to find out whether Berdyaev’s model of anarchism is in accord with orthodox Christianity. Berdyaev’s view that Christianity has a fundamental association with anarchy stems from his belief that there is a dynamic rivalry between the realm of Spirit and the realm of Caesar,<sup>18</sup> which he sees as two antagonistic competing powers that cannot be conjoined.

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<sup>16</sup> Jacques Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Marshall, *A History of Anarchism*, p. 85. Garrett Green similarly contends: ‘even if the Christian chooses to support a revolutionary policy, he must realize that his support comes from his Christian commitment rather than a commitment to revolution’. Garrett Green, *A Kingdom Not of This World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964), p. 28.

<sup>18</sup> Berdyaev uses ‘Caesar’ to represent the various authorities that conflict with God’s Kingdom and ‘Spirit’ to designate God’s rule.

### iii) The Two Realms

*My kingdom is not of this realm*

John 18:36

#### a) Carroll's Two Realms: Sense and Nonsense

If we begin by comparing our experience of reality to the insane worlds behind the looking-glass and underground, it is obvious that the two different grammars contain irreconcilable differences. Alice observes frequently how the world she left behind operated under very different circumstances: 'in *our* country [...] you'd generally get to somewhere else—if you ran very fast for a long time'.<sup>19</sup> Or, as she remarks to a speaking insect: 'none of them ever talk where *I* come from'.<sup>20</sup> Alice insists that the rules of her familiar world remain authoritative even though a number of fundamental laws of time and logic are flouted in Looking-Glass Land. In fact, the creatures Alice meets in the nonsense worlds react to her with a similar response, suggesting that her assumptions about the mechanics of universe are absurd or silly. Alice explains to the Queen in Looking-Glass land: 'In *our* country [...] there's only one day at a time' to which the Red Queen scornfully retorts: 'That's a poor thin way of doing things'.<sup>21</sup>

Nonsense humour is often located at the point of conflict between these competing ontologies. As we shall see, in the work of Nicholas Berdyaev there is constant reference to a two-realm antagonism: the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of Caesar. I will begin by exploring the nature of the dichotomy established by Berdyaev, asking whether it is orthodox to speak of a conflict between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of man in this way and if this equivocal dialectic can be described as anarchy. I will then look specifically at the Incarnation, the Church, and the role of the disciple as concrete examples of this anarchic tension.

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<sup>19</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*, p. 127.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 132.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 195.

## b) Berdyaev's Two Realms: Spirit and Caesar

Perhaps the most obvious and fundamental principle upon which Berdyaev's anarchism is founded is his militant claim: 'Until the end of time, there will always be two kingdoms [...] a struggle of the Spirit against Caesar'.<sup>22</sup> This gives the impression of a perpetual opposition and attempts no reconciliation between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of man, although for Berdyaev the result is already established even as the struggle goes on. Berdyaev recognises the invisible authority of Spirit and the powerlessness of Caesar, and claims that Christianity situates itself in the anarchic limbo between Caesar's defeat and Christ's return. We can see how this relates to the definition of anarchism as 'the condition of living without constituted authority', since Christianity challenges the legitimacy of Caesar's reign, whilst acknowledging Caesar's continued presence in human history.

This conception of anarchy has a direct connection to the final paradox addressed in the previous chapter—the now and not-yet reality of the Kingdom of God—in which it was stated that the authorities of death, sin and of secular government have been overcome by Christ, even though the constitution of his divine authority is still held in abeyance; which is to say, the rule of the Kingdom of God has not yet arrived in the fullness of its anticipated supremacy.

Berdyaev's theology is persistent in preaching a radical, antagonistic dichotomy between the realm of Spirit and the realm of Caesar. He concludes perhaps his most well-known text—*Freedom and the Spirit*—with the following words: 'Two conflicting ways of life are to be found here below; there is the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of this

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<sup>22</sup> Nicholas Berdyaev, *The Realm of Spirit and the Realm of Caesar*, trans. Donald A. Lowrie (London: Victor Gollancz LTD, 1952), p. 108.

world, and it is essential to make a real spiritual distinction between them'.<sup>23</sup> Our task now is to consider whether this position is orthodox.

A possible objection, which could collapse Berdyaev's carefully maintained dialectic, is the suggestion that there should be a *resolution* between the two realms, rather than an *overcoming*. Perhaps the Christian can adopt a less dramatic position by holding that governmental authority ought not to be obeyed blindly, but can be reformed through a democratic morality influenced by Christian sentiments. As Vernard Eller suggests, 'The Christian is to live above the law, and when the law would require him to do something contrary to the will of God he is to defy *that particular law*'.<sup>24</sup> This position could imply that secular government is not in aggressive antagonism to the realm of Spirit, but that authority must be to God first. If this view can be upheld as orthodox Christian teaching, it would counter Berdyaev's more radical stance that political rule is not only misguided but 'has poison within itself'.<sup>25</sup>

The case for Berdyaev's Christian anarchism, and the reason that Christians may react against Eller's suggestion, hinges on the identification of Christ as an anarchist and not as a political activist. Jesus' prayer for his disciples seems to support Berdyaev's belief that Christ and his followers are separated from political activism by maintaining that the authority of Caesar's reign has already been overcome.<sup>26</sup> According to John's gospel, Jesus says his disciples 'are not of the world, just as I am not of the world [...] As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world'.<sup>27</sup> Although Christ entered into the world, he did not belong to it in the way that a political activist must. For instance, he remained silent when asked to defend himself in the political trial in front of

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<sup>23</sup> Nicholas Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, trans. Oliver Fielding Clarke (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1935), p. 361.

<sup>24</sup> Vernard Eller, *Kierkegaard and Radical Discipleship* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 216.

<sup>25</sup> Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Realm of Spirit and the Realm of Caesar*, p. 85.

<sup>26</sup> 'Overcome' does seem to be the scriptural term to use, for example in 1 John 5:4-5 it states: 'For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus Christ is the Son of God'.

<sup>27</sup> John 17:16-18.

Pilate. In doing this, argues Jacques Ellul, Jesus effectively extracts himself from submitting to the grammar of political judgment.<sup>28</sup> This explanation suggests that Christ's silence is the only possible response from a non-political perspective. Ellul's interpretation, therefore, seems to complement Berdyaev's two-realm theory in his proclamation that 'there never was and there never can be such things as a Christian state, a Christian economy'.<sup>29</sup>

Jonathan Bartley in his recent book, *Faith and Politics After Christendom: The Church as a Movement for Anarchy*, makes the relevant point that 'secular government is "secular" not in the sense that it is irreligious but in the sense that its role is confined to this age (in Latin, *saeculum*) that is passing away. It does not and cannot in any way represent the promise of the new age that comes in with Christ'.<sup>30</sup> This supports Berdyaev's stance that Christianity establishes genuinely new and revolutionary principles of government, which are not contained within the grammar of a secular system. 'The higher spiritual world', he writes, 'ought never to be thought of on the analogy of the State, that is of power and authority'.<sup>31</sup> The realm of Christ is moreover consistent with a biblical account of leadership which deflects personal achievement and insists instead upon the sovereignty of God's will thereby identifying forgiveness and sacrifice as central rather than power or status. To this extent secular government does not appear to fit comfortably into a theocratic system. Even so, one might suggest that Berdyaev's and Bartley's rigid separation between divine and secular territory seems to

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<sup>28</sup> Ellul writes: 'It seems that Jesus did not regard these authorities as in any way just and that it was thus completely useless to defend himself'. Jacques Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity*, p. 68. See also Matthew 26:62-63.

<sup>29</sup> Nicholas Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man*, trans. N. Duddington (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1937), p. 133. Likewise, it would seem, there can never be such things as an anarchist state or economy. As Linda Damico explains in *The Anarchist Dimension of Liberation Theology* 'the anarchists caution that the State must not be used to destroy the State. No attempt must be made to legislate the State out of existence nor to affect its demise through the use of its own organizational and structural machinery'. Linda H. Damico, *The Anarchist Dimension of Liberation Theology* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1987), p. 75.

<sup>30</sup> Jonathan Bartley, *Faith and Politics After Christendom: The Church as a Movement for Anarchy* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2006), p. 10.

<sup>31</sup> Nicholas Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, p. 150.

raise the secular economy to the status of dialectic rival. Perhaps a *more* anarchic opposition to the realm of Caesar would stress the ‘alreadyness’ of the conquest of the Spirit.

In this light, the response of the Christian to the realm of Caesar might be more accurately considered as a sort of compassionate detachment rather than the aggressive opposition articulated by Berdyaev and Bartley, which seems to assume a timelessness of ‘the state’. Yet, whilst Berdyaev might appear to go too far in establishing the dichotomy of Spirit and Caesar, he at least exposes the radical element of the gospel message—the Christ presented in the Bible calls for a whole new way of living—a call that is often clouded by the integration of Church into state.

The word ‘anarchy’ in connection to Christianity could help to communicate to non-believers the radical, revolutionary aspect of New Testament teaching that is often hidden beneath stereotypes of Christians as law-abiding and rule-orientated. At the same time, associating anarchy with Christianity might direct Christians to see the authority of secular government as provisional. There is certainly an attitude of ‘non-attachment’ to worldly endeavour that we can locate in Scripture. Christ preaches: ‘do not be anxious, saying, “What shall we eat?” or “What shall we drink?” or “What shall we wear?” For the pagans seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you’.<sup>32</sup> Here the idea of non-attachment is manifest in the contrast between the attitude of the Christian and the pagan to physical concerns.

Christ’s teaching has an anarchic implication because it seeks to detach the believer from a this-worldly fixation, which is the chief concern of governments. I am of course not suggesting that Christ is indifferent to physical needs—indeed, a major portion of his miracles are bodily healings, and the feeding of the five thousand is obviously a

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<sup>32</sup> Matthew 6:31-33.

response to the this-worldly anxiety of what to eat. What I am proposing is that Christ preaches a freedom from the *preoccupation* with the physical and an elevation of this-worldly concerns, which is the primary concern of the secular state. The freedom from the anxiety of worldly existence is, according to Berdyaev, emphatically rooted in the realm of Spirit and not in Caesar. Whilst this does maintain the supreme distinction between living with the belief in the unseen reign of Spirit and living under the apparent rule of Caesar, the distinction does not need to give way to aggressive antagonism, but the description ‘anarchist’ could be helpful as an indicator that for the Christian a wholly new way of thinking politically is called for.

Highlighting the need for an anarchic stance against the regime of secular government, Berdyaev identifies Caesar as the symbol of human authority and the lust for power. ‘Render unto Caesar’, he argues, ‘does not mean a religious definition of Caesar and his realm; it does not imply evaluation at all. This is merely distinguishing between two different spheres which cannot be combined one with the other’.<sup>33</sup> Berdyaev argues that this reveals Christ’s non-political identity: ‘Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s’ he says, and then, arguably in a whole new grammar preaches ‘Give to God what is God’s’. Berdyaev believes that in this exchange Christ exposes the impermanence of Caesar’s kingdom and enters into an ‘as if’ relationship to worldly powers, which reiterates the anarchic formula whereby the Spirit rules *as if* in being, and Caesar is in being *as if* ruling.<sup>34</sup>

A similar rendering of the impermanence of Caesar’s governance occurs in Christ’s explanation to Pilate: ‘My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, then my servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, my kingdom is not of this realm’.<sup>35</sup> There seems to be an anarchic

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<sup>33</sup> Nicholas Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, pp. 69-70.

<sup>34</sup> In *Truth and Revelation* Berdyaev refers to the state’s ‘false pretensions to sovereignty’, describing its ‘relative and transient functional significance’. Nicholas Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, p. 150.

<sup>35</sup> John 18:36-37.



connotation in the undercutting of the political sphere and the disciples' allegiance to an unconstituted authority. Christ not only proclaims the reality of another, higher kingdom, but also his sovereignty over it. Similarly, in the name of Christ, Paul articulates the power of God's sovereignty *in absentia*. He challenges the Corinthians writing: 'For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and *as if* present I have already pronounced judgment'.<sup>36</sup> Paul's use of 'as if' contradicts the secular preoccupation with a tangible display of power and claims instead that spiritual presence, though invisible, has authority. This supports Berdyaev's proposal that even prior to the Parousia, allegiance must be to God alone and that modern Christians, like the Corinthians, ought to act *as if* God's authority were tangible. We might therefore understand the 'as if' as operative in a dual directive—the world of Caesar as if it is not and the Kingdom of God as if it is.

It is consequently necessary for Berdyaev to highlight the division between the two realms in order to convey a sense of the radical difference and shattering newness that is ushered in with God's Kingdom. Berdyaev believes that the rule of the Spirit 'concerns something much greater than a new society. What is involved is a new cosmos'.<sup>37</sup> Only a type of apophatic anarchism can come close to describing the difference between the reign of Caesar and the sovereignty of the Spirit.<sup>38</sup> In a similar way, the association of Christianity with nonsense might help to communicate something of the radically alternative mentality required for a genuine acceptance of the paradoxes of Christianity. To assert that Christ was raised from the dead more than just disagrees with modern empiricism, for many it is a statement on par with the Mad Hatter's insane utterances and thereby fundamentally demarcates religious faith from secular thought. An entirely new way of thinking is called for. 'The coming of a new aeon', writes Berdyaev,

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<sup>36</sup> 1 Corinthians 5:3. My emphasis.

<sup>37</sup> Nicholas Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, p. 149.

<sup>38</sup> There is indeed a sense of ineffability concerning the coming of the Kingdom of God given its radical newness. Berdyaev explains: 'I am speaking of something entirely different, of a new aeon and of a new revelation within it'. *Ibid.*, p. 150.

‘presupposes a change in the human mind’.<sup>39</sup> Ultimately what Berdyaev teaches is that there is no way of modifying the realm of Caesar to establish or resemble the realm of Spirit and his paradigm of oppositional realms identifies effectively the irreconcilability between divine and secular rule. In order to demonstrate this, I will look at three significant exemplary cases: the Incarnation, the Church and the disciple. In each of these, something of the anarchic sense of opposition is manifest. They all announce that there is an alternative reality which challenges the authority of the secular world.

### **The Incarnation**

The previous chapter on paradox affirmed that orthodox Christianity upholds the complete divinity of the fully human Christ. We are now in a position to explore the Incarnation as an anarchic embodiment of the tension between the two realms. John Caputo distinguishes two logics rather than two realms when he describes a similar fundamental duality between God’s Kingdom and the world’s. More precisely, he discriminates between ‘the logic of the mundane constituted economies and the logic of the event’. He explains: ‘I see in Jesus of Nazareth an exemplary embodiment of the logic or paralogic of the gift, who told paradoxical parables about and who was himself a parable of the kingdom of God, which he opposed to the economy of the “world”’.<sup>40</sup> In this quotation Caputo locates within the person of Christ a force that overturns the logic of the world. It is a point of conflict in which a paradoxical logic triumphs over ‘the logic of the mundane’ and to this end it would seem that Christ’s Incarnation can be viewed symbolically as the herald of an anarchic age.

It should be noted that the reason Berdyaev considers the event of God becoming man anarchic is not because of any internal struggle between the divine and human

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 151.

<sup>40</sup> John D. Caputo, *After the Death of God*, p. 82.

natures within the hypostatic union, but rather because it announces the defeat of Caesar, sin and death. Christians might legitimately term this anarchic because such a claim displaces the governing authority but is not recognized by those in power. Christ affirms ‘I have overcome the world’, and yet still warns his disciples, ‘in the world you will have tribulation’.<sup>41</sup>

It is once again necessary to highlight the paradoxical aspect of this statement. From a heavenly perspective the realm of Caesar is already defeated; however, from the point of view of human history, soteriology has a linear appearance. This would suggest that if anarchy is an apposite descriptor at all, it refers to the *current* epoch. It is in his incarnate form that Christ announces the powerlessness of secular government whilst proclaiming the not-yetness of the heavenly Kingdom. Christ’s earthly existence contradicts and shatters the expectations of the world’s standard; the King of kings is born in a manger, the long-awaited Messiah enters Jerusalem on a colt. The Incarnation inverts the common conception of power and wealth. By dwelling with man and as man, Christ represents an anarchic disturbance not only in his words but also in his person. Karl Barth encapsulates this idea in his statement that Christ ‘overcomes the flesh in becoming flesh’.<sup>42</sup> Barth understands Christ’s enfleshment as his victory and his person as his mission.

In this regard, it could be suggested that Barth shares a Berdyaevian emphasis in his view that the Incarnation both brings about redemption and opens the way for man to participate in its salvific effect. This participation is made possible insofar as in entering humanity God has taken on the very essence of manhood. For Berdyaev, this is an important theme, as he sees Christ’s birth ultimately as the birth of all, and indeed as the perpetual birth of man in Christ and Christ in man. In *Freedom and the Spirit* he states: ‘through the Son we return to the bosom of the Father. With Him a new race of human

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<sup>41</sup> John 16:33.

<sup>42</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics 4:1*, p. 251.

beings begins, the race of Christ, born and regenerated in the Spirit. Christ is in man and man is in Christ'.<sup>43</sup> Depicted in this light, the Incarnation is not only an announcement of what is to come but also acts as the analogical bond of reconciliation between man and God, which disturbs and overcomes the sovereignty of sin.

Significantly, this kenotic suspension enables Christ's analogous embodiment of man's situation. Kenosis is a letting go of divinity that corresponds to man's condition in the 'not-yet' manifestation of divine sovereignty. In giving himself to be known, Christ 'preposterously' announces the future state of his own eternal rule<sup>44</sup> whilst simultaneously opposing the authority of Caesar, thus bringing about a state without constituted authority; the condition of ἀναρχία. It was noted in the previous chapter that the kenosis is radically localised and temporalised, elevating the significance Christians attach to the status of the Church as Christ's resurrected body. The New Testament proclaims the guarantee of the unfailing presence of the Spirit to the Church and in this sense the anarchic epoch is not simply about awaiting salvation, but concerns an active carrying-out of future promise. It is to this ecclesial manifestation that we now turn.

## **The Church**

In ultimate terms, Berdyaev sees in the moment of Incarnation the unification of the invisible with the visible. 'Incarnation', he writes, 'is symbolization; the visible Church is the symbolization of the Church invisible, the earthly hierarchy of the heavenly'.<sup>45</sup> Berdyaev is articulating the belief that Christ is the image of the invisible God and at once the ascended and invisible ruler of the visible Church. Hence, Church for Berdyaev is holy territory—it is demarcated off from Caesar's reign in a manner evocative of the

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<sup>43</sup> Nicholas Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, p. 198.

<sup>44</sup> Here I am using 'preposterous' to mean that which in a certain sense can be both read backwards and precedes itself.

<sup>45</sup> Nicholas Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, p. 335.

Celtic monastic tradition. In Celtic times the territory of the *monasteria* was physically separated by the *vallum* (a ditch surrounding the monastery), which Ian Bradley explains ‘delineated an area that was to be regarded as sacred and in which the values of the Kingdom of God rather than the world of humankind would prevail’.<sup>46</sup> Berdyaev’s account of the clash between the two realms captures something of this ancient sense of holy separateness. He writes that there is ‘an eternal conflict between Christ the God-Man, and Caesar the man-god’, and then suggests that this entails that ‘Christianity cannot be reconciled to the sovereignty of any kind of earthly authority’.<sup>47</sup>

Ultimately, what is evident here is that the rule of Spirit contains within it the non-rule of Caesar and the Church occupies this in-between space, announcing and preparing the way for the full arrival of that which is but which is also yet to come. Christ ordains this lacuna by establishing the Church, which through the sacraments demonstrate the already within the not-yet, providing visible signs of invisible authority. This liberates the Church to practice ‘weakness’ and charity as the revelation of the counter-cultural strength of the anarchic order of the Spirit. In Christ there is both a rejection of the authority of visible powers and a participatory celebration in the unseen conquest. By accepting the eternal significance of the Incarnation, the Church is not beset with eschatological insecurity, but is liberated to experience in the present the salvific assurance of the future.

## **The Disciple**

We have now described two vital manifestations of Berdyaev’s two-realm theory. The Incarnation was discussed as the herald of the Spirit triumphant and the Church was considered as the visible and present instantiation of the invisible, future reign. The third

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<sup>46</sup> Ian Bradley, *Colonies of Heaven* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000), pp. 18-19.

<sup>47</sup> Nicholas Berdyaev, *The Realm of Spirit and the Realm of Caesar*, p. 72.

dimension demarcating the realm of Spirit from the realm of Caesar is the witness of the disciple.

We have already acknowledged that from a heavenly perspective the ‘conflict’ between the two realms is not a struggle in the sense that the sovereignty is undecided. Yet, Berdyaev wants at the same time to emphasize that Christ’s sovereign relinquishing of the perspective of the Father gives him a radical identification with humanity, which creates an example that his followers can emulate.<sup>48</sup> Through Christ the individual is connected to the eschatological Kingdom and participates in this alternate reality. Whilst on earth Christ leaves his disciples with the gift of peace: ‘my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid’.<sup>27</sup> This phrase demonstrates how Christ invites his disciples to partake in the eschatological security of the triumph of the Spirit, which he acknowledges is neither given nor received according to the rules of this world.

It is important to understand that the concept of discipleship is not solely a matter of metaphysical awareness of Christ’s sovereignty, but it also seems to entail a disruptive political dimension. In Luke’s gospel Christ professes that his followers ‘will be brought before kings and governors because of my name’, but emphasises that ‘not a hair [...] will perish’.<sup>49</sup> This indicates that the communication of Christ’s message will necessarily aggravate those in authority, suggesting that the disciple’s task is subversive of conventional powers. One of the reasons why Berdyaev’s association of Christianity with anarchism seems to work is because its extremity is consistent with Christ’s teaching of radical division between the disciples and the world. John 15:19 states: ‘If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you’.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Though at the same time, Berdyaev upholds that Christ’s involvement in the Trinity is still radically different to ours.

<sup>49</sup> Luke 21:12,18.

<sup>50</sup> John 15:19.

The estrangement between Christ's followers and the rest of the world is further emphasised in Christ's command to be holy. 'Just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written "Be holy, because I am holy"''.<sup>51</sup> The initial command in Leviticus uses the Hebrew word for holy ((קדוש) which also means 'separateness'. Accordingly, the obligation for the Christian is to be set apart from the ideals, values and methods of the world's politics.<sup>52</sup> It is a command to anarchism, where anarchism is identified as an elected separateness deriving from faith in an unseen power. Christ explains to his disciples that he will cease to be visible in the world but will retain his rulership over it: 'I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer [...] I have conquered the world''.<sup>53</sup> Belief in this statement suggests that it might be helpful to define the Christian imagination as anarchic in the sense that being a disciple of Christ requires the mental agility to 'overaccept'<sup>54</sup> earthly signs which oppose the reality of Christ's eternal conquest. In doing so, Berdyaev believes the Christian participates in the unseen reality of the not-yet Kingdom.

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<sup>51</sup> 1 Peter 1:15-16.

<sup>52</sup> For an excellent discussion of the concept of biblical holiness see Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950).

<sup>53</sup> John 16:10,33.

<sup>54</sup> I am using the term 'overaccept' following Samuel Wells, who develops a theory of overacceptance as a way to respond to opposition to Christian theology. 'Overaccepting', he writes 'is accepting in the light of a larger story'. Wells explains that one can 'block' a challenge to Christ's message simply by discounting it, or one can accept such a proposition and therefore give in to the demands of atheism. However, the third alternative is the concept that it is possible to accept the sceptic's comment but explain that they have not understood the whole picture. For example, a consistent dispute with Christianity is the belief that it is impossible to rise from the dead. To block this would be simply to state "no it isn't"; to accept it is to oblige the sceptic and reform one's own view; but to overaccept is to agree that it is indeed a logical and scientific impossibility but to explain that there is another grammar in which rising from the dead makes perfect sense. Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (London: SPCK, 2004), p. 131.

#### iv) Theological Estrangement

*Put to death all that is earthly in you*

Colossians 3:5

We began this chapter by discussing how a basic prerequisite for engaging with nonsense literature is the willingness to unsettle quotidian norms. Like Berdyaev's account of the two rival kingdoms, Carroll's Wonderland also encompasses two conflicting realms—sense and nonsense. We observed how this tension has provoked nonsense critics and theologians alike to utilise the word 'anarchism' in order to describe how their respective dualities fuel an antagonistic conflict. In nonsense literature we witnessed the rebellion against the world of conventional logic and described how Alice's introduction to nonsense principles causes her to question the reliability of her preconceived norms.<sup>55</sup> Having already gestured to the idea that Christ's triumph disturbs and unsettles the governing principles in the realm of Caesar, we can now explore how the believer disassociates himself from the visible kingdom of Caesar in order to submit to the invisible rule of the Spirit. Or, in the words of Coleridge, how we can 'awake[n] the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom and direc[t] it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us'.<sup>56</sup> To apply anarchy in a Christian context, therefore, we must first look at the theory and practice of revelatory disturbance.

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<sup>55</sup> It is worth mentioning that in both stories the playful, anarchic realm of nonsense is itself undermined by the sporadic return of sense at the close of the books, where it is revealed it was only a dream after all, puncturing the imaginative vision with an allusion to realm outside. This could be described as a double disturbance or reflexive rebellion whereby the reader must first defy everyday logic by engaging in a nonsense world where animals can speak, and then turn this topsy-turvy world on its head by resurfacing in the world of sense.

<sup>56</sup> S. T. Coleridge, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Volume 7: Biographia Literaria* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 314.



a) The Theory of Revelatory Disturbance

An American contemporary of Berdyaev, William James, writing at the end of the nineteenth century claimed: ‘the greatest revolution of our generation is the discovery that human beings, by changing the inner attitude of their minds can change the outer aspects of their lives’.<sup>57</sup> The idea that the imagination has outward transformative power is a sentiment articulated in the Bible,<sup>58</sup> and recognised by Berdyaev.<sup>59</sup> In the succeeding section I will be considering the constructive aspect of this transformation, but before that we need to address its disturbance, which for Berdyaev begins with the imaginative deconstruction of its constituted authority.

Like Christ in the ‘far country’, his followers are instructed to assume the role of stranger and not seek rest or satisfaction in the realm of Caesar.<sup>60</sup> This conviction looks a lot like anarchism from the perspective of the state, since it actively denounces conformity to the conventional powers. Whilst it will be important to recognise the practical implications of seeking the role of stranger within a secular polis, I want to argue that it is in the imagination that the mental stimulus for such action takes root. The imagination is commonly understood within nonsense literature as the portal by which an individual can enter or access alternative worlds. However, one might argue that the act of imagining different worlds has the effect of detaching the individual from the familiar and inviting a critical assessment of their everyday existence. This idea is supported by the authors of *Tales for Little Rebels* who believe that engaging in fantasy stories ‘teach[es] the young that the world constructed by their elders is an artificial thing’.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> William James, quoted in *Clinical Addiction Psychiatry*, (eds.) David Brizer and Ricardo Castaneda (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 58.

<sup>58</sup> Christ’s miracles often require the individual to attune their mind to the possibility of being healed in order for this to become a reality. For example Luke 18:42 states: ‘And Jesus said to him, “Recover your sight; your faith has made you well.”’

<sup>59</sup> ‘Creative fancy is capable of producing real and vital consequences’. Nicholas Berdyaev, *The Beginning and the End*, p. 117.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Luke 9:58.

<sup>61</sup> Celia Catlett Anderson and Marilyn Fain Apseloff quoted in *Tales for Little Rebels*, (eds.) Julia L.

Following the biblical outline of faith, the primary step to imagining an alternative reality is creatively to abstract oneself from the seen reality. Since the function of the imagination as a means of conscious alienation from society is a prominent element in the theory and work of Bertolt Brecht, it may be instructive to consider his concept of *Verfremdungseffekt*.<sup>62</sup>

This might seem a deeply incongruous approach given Brecht's deep-rooted dislike and mistrust of all religious systems, particularly Christianity, which he viewed as a corrupt and oppressive force. Yet, if we focus on the anarchic component of the Christian imagination we find a surprising overlap between Brechtian socio-political satire and Berdyaev's Christian anarchism. Much of Brecht's writing, like Berdyaev's was extremely subversive in his own political climate. For example, during the premier of his play *The Rise and Fall of the City Mahogany* in 1930, Nazis in the audience rioted in protest. By 1929 Brecht had already embraced communism and was significantly influenced by Marx's *Das Kapital*. From this period, Brecht not only satirised capitalist ideas and public figures, but also encouraged his audience to sympathise with his Marxist ideology. Douglas Kellner explains, 'He wanted his spectators [...] to participate in an active process of critical thought that would provide insights into the workings of society, and to see the need for and to implement radical social change'.<sup>63</sup> This same sentiment could be applied to Berdyaev's writing, which overtly promoted both Marxism and anarchism.<sup>64</sup>

Among other devices, Brecht's 'epic theatre' used montage and tableaux to depict social injustice. These contributed to his primary theatrical interest of creating the *Verfremdungseffekt*. Kellner explains that 'this was intended to "estrangle" or "distance"

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Micklenburg and Philip Nel (New York: New York University Press, 2008), p. 137.

<sup>62</sup> This is translated as having the effect of 'distancing' or 'alienating'.

<sup>63</sup> Douglas Kellner 'Brecht's Marxist Aesthetic: The Korsch Connection' in *Bertolt Brecht: Political Theory and Literary Practice*, (eds.) B. N. Weber and Hubert Heinen (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1980), p. 32.

<sup>64</sup> In September 1922 Berdyaev was exiled from Russia on the 'Philosopher's ship' since the Bolshevik authorities were concerned that Berdyaev's writing and lecturing was leading to unrest and rebellion.

the spectator and thus prevent empathy and identification with the situation and the characters and allow the adoption of a critical attitude toward the actions in the play'.<sup>65</sup> Brecht was resolute that in order to achieve this degree of analytical political observation, an imaginative detachment was required. The audience was supposed to be critically aware and not entranced, since Brecht wanted to remind them that they were watching a piece of theatre. This he achieved in many ways, such as keeping the auditorium lit, having the actors direct their speech to the audience and employing the 'play within a play' technique.

We can begin to sense some similarities with an anarchic account of Christianity, which, likewise, desires to exhibit the world as a counter-reality and to provoke its 'audience' to engage critically in the unfolding of the global drama and approach it from a detached perspective. According to Alison Milbank, 'we need estranging techniques if we are to shock people into engagement with reality, so that they may appreciate the religious sense and we can begin to explain the Christian faith at all'.<sup>66</sup> Given its connotations of riot and rebellion, the word 'anarchy' is perhaps the 'shock' required to rouse individuals from 'the lethargy of custom' and to stimulate a desire to question quotidian norms.

Hence, in spite of their wholly secular aesthetic origins, certain aspects of Brecht's theatrical technique may be helpful for explaining the scriptural notion of alienation, such as the command in Romans 12:2: 'Do not be conformed to the present age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind'. The anarcho-theistic imagination considered in accordance with Romans corresponds to Brechtian practices in the sense that the Christian stands apart from the present age and believes in the power of mental transformation to re-envisage the world. This contention is mirrored in Walter Benjamin's explanation that 'the response to epic theatre should be: "Things can happen

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<sup>65</sup> Douglas Kellner 'Brecht's Marxist Aesthetic: The Korsch Connection', p. 32.

<sup>66</sup> Alison Milbank, 'Apologetics and the Imagination: Making Strange' in *Imaginative Apologetics: Theology, Philosophy and the Catholic Tradition*, p. 38.

this way, but they can also happen a quite different way”<sup>67</sup>. From this perspective Benjamin unintentionally seems to unite the utopic vision of Christian eschatology with Brechtian social satire. Benjamin brings to the surface the basic premise that Brechtian theatre encompasses its own two-world dialectic, where involvement in one leads to the disturbance of the other.

There has been some relevant investigation into the link between religious eschatology and Brechtian satire. For example, Keith Dickson in *Towards Utopia: A Study of Brecht* argues that ‘the utopian is a satirist in disguise’. He continues: ‘His [Brecht’s] ideal commonwealth is an implicit criticism of his own society, the shortcomings of which can be measured against the standards of an imaginary world’.<sup>68</sup> This interpretation of Brechtian theatre as both critical and utopic parallels the aspect of revelatory disturbance in Berdyaev’s anarchism. The belief in an imaginary world requires a cognitive alienation comparable to the biblical advocacy of non-attachment: ‘[let] those who deal with the world [live] as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away’.<sup>69</sup> Such a sentiment further emphasises both Berdyaev and Brecht’s belief that there is an alternative reality that requires a mental estrangement from what is immediately observable. It is upon this lack of satisfaction with the apparent reality that Berdyaev founds the anarchism of the Christian imagination: ‘the world does not begin and end with this condition, which is actually our fallen state: another condition of the world is possible and it requires another type of knowing’.<sup>70</sup> Such a state of dissatisfaction is the principal goal of disturbance since experiencing the inadequacy of the secular approach can provide the impetus for seeking a spiritual alternative.

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<sup>67</sup> Quoted by Douglas Kellner in ‘Brecht’s Marxist Aesthetic: The Korsch Connection’, p. 32.

<sup>68</sup> Keith A. Dickson, *Towards Utopia: A Study of Brecht* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 2.

<sup>69</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:31.

<sup>70</sup> Nicholas Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, p. 31.

Of course, the analogy between Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* and Christian detachment is not entirely apposite. Firstly, as Dickson notes, Brecht's sensationalist undercurrent is in tension with many aspects of orthodox Christianity.<sup>71</sup> Secondly, Brecht is solely concerned with the criticism and disturbance of the world, as, unlike Berdyaev, he does not believe in the 'alreadiness' of his socialist ideal. Dickson addresses this theme, commenting 'writers almost invariably find the contradictions of the present world a much more rewarding subject than a future world in which the gulf between actuality and the ideal has been bridged. Brecht is no exception'.<sup>72</sup> The focus on negation *above* transfiguration reduces the revolutionary potential of Brecht's work, making his contextual political satire more of a modern romantic utopia. Efim Etkind, a great supporter of Brechtian technique, accepts nevertheless that Brecht's vision has lost some of its revolutionary force: 'the greatest misfortune that could have befallen Brecht was to become a classic. Unfortunately, this has happened. Brecht has truly become a classic'.<sup>73</sup>

Brecht's intention to turn theatre into propaganda, allowed him to satirize powerfully his own political climate, but in so doing, prevented his plays from being continually revolutionary. An important difference between satire and anarchism seems to be that in general anarchism signifies an ideology of perpetual transformation and opposition to *all* forms of constituted authority, whereas satire seems to be more targeted towards particular individuals or groups (although satire can of course have relevance beyond its particulars and anarchy can be directed to specific circumstances or states). The association of Christianity and anarchism thus identifies the gospel narratives with eternal revolution, suggesting that the gospels, unlike Brecht's theatre, can never be set aside as a classic in Etkind's sense. However, demonstrating a degree of verisimilitude

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<sup>71</sup> Dickson explains 'the other-world-likeness of so much traditional Christian thought was anathema to the sensualist in Brecht, who in one of his first poems extolled tobacco and brandy as sacraments'. Keith A. Dickson, *Towards Utopia: A Study of Brecht*, p. 133.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>73</sup> Efim Etkind, 'Brecht and the Soviet Theatre' in *Bertolt Brecht*, p. 81.

between Berdyaev and Brecht has been helpful to understand the theory of disturbance as the imaginative deconstruction of the principles of the realm of Caesar

#### b) The Practice of Revelatory Disturbance

##### **Disturbing law and lawfulness**

We are now in a position to address the ramifications of the theory of revelatory disturbance and discuss how this helps us to understand Berdyaev's association of anarchism with Christianity. Perhaps the foremost consequence of devaluing the principalities of this world is the legalistic implication of non-belonging, and so we will begin by looking at Berdyaev's belief that faith in Christ effects a certain detachment from the law of Caesar. This will lead us into social and judicial territories which together form the second major area in which the unsettling of secular norms results in an anarchic deconstruction of constituted authorities.

Christianity has always had a complex relationship with the concept of law (both the Mosaic Law and the law of the state). As one would expect from an anarchic writer like Berdyaev the contrast between freedom and law is a major concern throughout his work. However, as it has hopefully been made clear, law, hierarchy and order are not necessarily at odds with an anarchic reading of Christianity, but the terms require precise and careful definition if they are to accord with Christian anarchism. The philosopher Giorgio Agamben offers some insightful commentary on the Christian attitude to law, which will help us to elucidate and consolidate Berdyaev's position. Agamben's messianic narrative involves a revocation and redefinition of the authority of law, and it is within Agamben's notion of 'messianic time' that we can locate Berdyaev's concept of freedom and use this to articulate the experience of living between the two competing ontologies of Spirit and Caesar.

We have described anarchism as an era or an epoch traversing the period between Christ's defeat of Caesar and the full sovereignty of his reign. Agamben's representation of messianic time likewise takes its cue from the paradox of the now and the not yet.<sup>74</sup> Briefly, messianic time corresponds to the anarchic era insofar as both are concerned with action in the moment of suspension. Agamben describes messianic time as 'the time *that* we ourselves are, and for this very reason, is the only real time, the only time we have'.<sup>75</sup> For Berdyaev this era between times is the only time in which we can make a free decision, it is the space of immediate freedom which has been carved out of the kingdom of man and re-oriented to the Kingdom of God. Similarly, Agamben defines messianic time as 'that part of secular time which undergoes an entirely transformative contraction'.<sup>76</sup> This transformation from secular temporality reveals the stifling limitations of legalism and opens up the possibility of freedom and autonomy.

Agamben wants to understand how in the process of transformation a Christian can integrate the law and yet remain separate from it. Although this is not the same as Berdyaev's anarchism, it nevertheless reveals a certain correspondent attitude to law as both writers comment on the insufficiency of the law whilst conceding the necessity of its presence. Agamben writes, 'the messianic is not the destruction but the deactivation of the law, rendering the law inexecutable',<sup>77</sup> and here we can see that like Berdyaev the *fact* of the law is upheld, but the *power* of the law is deactivated: Caesar is in *being* but his *authority* has been unsettled.

Perhaps at this stage it will be helpful to clarify what we mean by 'law' in a Christian context. In Paul's epistle to the Romans the meaning of the word 'law' is subject to some debate. In general his references indicate that he is referring to the

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<sup>74</sup> In *The Time that Remains*, Agamben writes: 'The messianic event has already happened, salvation has already been achieved according to believers. But, nevertheless, in order to truly be fulfilled, this implies an additional time'. Giorgio Agamben, *The Time that Remains*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Palto Alto: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 69.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

Mosaic Law and contrasting salvation through grace with justification by adherence to religious rules.<sup>78</sup> However, Paul also extends the meaning of *nomos* to cover a wider application of law in terms of the governance of sin and death. He writes: 'I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin'.<sup>79</sup> The Berdyaevian discrimination between Spirit and Caesar seems to be apparent in the division between 'the law of God' and 'the law of sin'. Berdyaev himself refers at times to the 'law of Christ'<sup>80</sup> and the 'law of Caesar'.<sup>81</sup>

Using Paul's more general application of the concept of law, it becomes evident that there must be dissatisfaction with the 'law of sin' prior to encountering messianic freedom.<sup>82</sup> Yet, as Paul indicates elsewhere, life in the Spirit is also acquiescence to a law of a different kind: 'For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death'.<sup>83</sup> The juxtaposition of freedom through law brings us back to the territory of paradox where autonomy and authority 'impossibly' co-mingle. If God is understood as the source of freedom, the religious imagination can be seen as a voluntary submission to the wellspring of all freedom.

The identification of Christianity with anarchism becomes particularly important here, since such a conjunction could help to prevent the Christian understanding of submission to freedom from being mistaken for a secular version of Kantian autonomy. Peter Marshall claims that anarchism accepts Kant's view of autonomy as self-imposed

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<sup>78</sup> F. F. Bruce identifies four specific uses of law in Romans: 1) the Pentateuch, 2) the Old Testament as a whole, 3) a principle, 4) the Law of God. Bruce argues that Paul transforms the concept of law from 'an external code of regulations' to 'a new principle of life' that is 'implanted within the hearts' of believers. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans: An Introduction and Commentary* (London: Tyndale Press, 1963), p. 57.

<sup>79</sup> Romans 7:21-23.

<sup>80</sup> Nicholas Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, trans. R. M. French (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1947), p. 211.

<sup>81</sup> Nicholas Berdyaev, *The Realm of Spirit and the Realm of Caesar*, p. 65.

<sup>82</sup> Paul's contrast between law and salvation is particularly emphatic in Romans 10:4 where he states 'Christ is the end of the law, that everyone who has faith may be justified'.

<sup>83</sup> Romans 8:2.



rules which have been freely taken on by the individual.<sup>84</sup> Yet, Paul's epistle to the Romans teaches that outside of relationship with Christ there are no free choices as man is bound by his inordinate desire.<sup>85</sup> Agamben would likewise argue that the secular world has an unawareness of messianic time, which prevents participation in the moment of freedom from the law. A radical revolution is required to make one aware of messianic time, as Paul indicates: 'by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit'.<sup>86</sup> Here we can recognise the moment of disturbance as a necessary precursor to following Christ. The act of 'dying to' or 'putting to death' worldly values is perhaps the ultimate expression of theological estrangement, which Paul presents as a mandatory initiation in order to enter into the freedom of the Spirit.

In *Destiny of Man*, we can find a similar pattern demanding the total dismantling of the principle of law prior to receiving Christ's message: 'the Gospel overcomes and abolishes the ethic of law and replaces it by another, the higher and noble ethic of love and freedom. Christianity opens the way to the Kingdom of God, where there is no longer any law'.<sup>87</sup> That is not to say that the Kingdom of God is without order, but that 'law' is not needed where the Spirit has supreme reign. This is based on the understanding that it is not the law which prevents the individual from sinning, but the power of Christ's Resurrection imparted through the Spirit.

An interesting interpretation of the Christian attitude to law can be found in Evagrius of Pontus' discussion on *apatheia* written at the end of the fourth century. *Apatheia* (translated as 'impassability') is, according to Evagrius, the status reached when one is able to combat sinful passions. He writes, 'The one who is perfect does not practice

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<sup>84</sup> Peter Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism*, p. 38.

<sup>85</sup> For example Romans 7:15, 20 indicates that sin usurps freedom 'For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate [...] Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me'.

<sup>86</sup> Romans 7:5-6.

<sup>87</sup> Quoted in *Christian Existentialism: A Berdyaev Anthology*, trans. Donald A. Lowrie, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1965), pp. 195-6.

abstinence and the one who is impassible does not practice perseverance, since perseverance is for the person subject to the passions and abstinence for the person who is troubled'.<sup>88</sup> This state of *apatheia*, which is in-keeping with the idea of a detached attitude to the physical world, provides a parallel with Paul's teaching: 'if you are led by the Spirit you are not under the law'.<sup>89</sup> This freedom from the law once again reflects the conditions of *anarchia*, whereby the law retains a superficial ontology, but its potency has been comprehensively destabilised.

### **Disturbing the social and judicial**

The deconstruction of the concept of law witnessed in the New Testament is not only pitched against religious *halakha*<sup>90</sup> but also extends into the territory of socio-political laws concerning class systems and the division of power. It might therefore not come as a surprise that in areas of dramatic social and political injustice Christians have led some of the major rebellions against the state, and in modern times this attitude has led to the foundation of Liberation Theology. Leonardo Boff, a central figure of the movement currently working alongside the marginalized in Brazil, echoes Paul's words to the Galatians in his own ministry. For Boff, it is a manifest truth that 'to enter the kingdom it is not sufficient to do what the law ordains'. He explains: 'the present order of things cannot save people from their fundamental alienation. It is order in the midst of disorder. A change of life is required, a complete turnabout of the old situation'.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Evagrius of Pontus c.345-399 had a significant influence on virtually all Byzantine monastic teaching and he is still widely used today within the Catholic model. 'Praktikos' *The Greek Ascetic Corpus* trans. Robert E. Sinkewicz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 109.

<sup>89</sup> Galatians 5:18.

<sup>90</sup> *Halakha* is the Judaic principle that one can attain righteousness in God's sight through observing piously the holiness codes of the Old Testament.

<sup>91</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, trans. Patrick Hughes (New York: Orbis Books, 1979), p. 73. For further information on the relationship between anarchism and liberation theology see Linda H. Damico, *The Anarchist Dimension of Liberation Theology*, She concludes that 'Liberation theology's new society, in whatever language it is presents, is anarchist in essence', p. 199.

Boff considers this ‘turnabout’ to be the non-conformity to earthly authorities, brought about by an imaginative disturbance of secular rule. In reference to the sentiments revealed in the Sermon on the Mount, Boff is emphatic this demonstrates that ‘Christ did not come to bring a more radical and severe law, nor did he preach a more perfect pharisaism. He preached a gospel, which signifies good news: It is not the law that saves but love’.<sup>92</sup> According to both Boff and Berdyaev the supreme anarchic dimension to the Sermon on the Mount is its disestablishment of commonplace norms, which Boff believes, ‘checkmates all fetishistic and inhuman subordination to a system, be it social or religious’.<sup>93</sup>

The anarchic process of disturbing the social sphere, interestingly, corresponds to the type of political nihilism practiced by the Russian nihilists in the 1860’s, in which there was an ideological revolution that sought to break down and expose elitism embedded in Russian society.<sup>94</sup> The historian Riasanovsky explains: ‘The earnest young men and women [nihilists] of the 1860’s wanted to cut through every polite veneer, to get rid of all conventional sham, to get to the bottom of things’.<sup>95</sup> This, in some sense, echoes the agenda of theologians such as Boff and Berdyaev, but more fundamentally it shares in the basic sentiment of the gospels that God’s grace cannot be bought, earned or won by social status.

One could perhaps recognise a nihilistic dimension to the Christian teaching of righteousness through faith. In Paul’s letter to the Romans he echoes the despondent words of the Psalmist: ‘None is righteous, no, not one [...] all have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one’.<sup>96</sup> This moment of all-encompassing negation of human righteousness is in one sense an echo of the nihilistic

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<sup>92</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, p. 73.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>94</sup> Berdyaev himself never sympathized with the nihilists and within his texts there is little interaction with their ideas.

<sup>95</sup> Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, *A History of Russia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 381.

<sup>96</sup> Romans 3:10, 12.

belief that all human pretension to honour and virtue is baseless. Of course within Christianity this anarcho-nihilistic sentiment is offered alongside the jubilatory proclamation that through Christ we can attain righteousness and worth. However, the sense of jubilation is only so rich and joyous because of the contemplation of the desperate situation of man's inability to redeem himself. So, although an anarcho-nihilistic stance on the universe is not at all an accurate depiction of Christian belief,<sup>97</sup> the association with nihilism, like anarchism, nevertheless communicates the ineffectual nature of all worldly systems of righteousness, echoing Paul's claim: 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God'.<sup>98</sup> Hence, the abandonment of faith in humanity's system of valuation shared by the anarchist and nihilist is perhaps closer to the message of Salvation than the attempt to justify oneself through obeying a set of rules or conformity to a model of social acceptability.

A further reason Berdyaev gives for seeking to undermine the validity of secular justice is that it ignores the divine authorship of its moral standard. He believes that one of the central problems of secular government consists in its failure to recognise that 'good' has a divine ontology and that this denial reveals the ultimate rebellion against the authority of the Kingdom of God. According to Berdyaev, 'the concepts of good and evil incarnate in customs, depend on society, on the social whole, but good and evil themselves do not; on the contrary, society depends upon good and evil, upon their ontology'.<sup>99</sup> Berdyaev reacts against the secular attempt to section off ontology from legality as he sees it as resistance to the permeation of the Spirit in the realm of Caesar and as a form of authoritarianism subjecting people to judgment whilst failing to account for the ontology of their measurement of justice. Berdyaev's message remains relevant in

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<sup>97</sup> Jacques Ellul is keen to make the distinction between an anarchic interpretation of Christianity and nihilism. Ellul writes: 'A second aspect of the radical contradiction between Christian revelation and nihilism relates to the fact that history is given *meaning*' Jacques Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), p. 147.

<sup>98</sup> Romans 3:23-24.

<sup>99</sup> Nicholas Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man*, p. 24.

the current secular world where governments implement moral standards without recognition of a spiritual foundation. The application of Christian anarchism in this context seeks to unsettle the secular system in order to reveal the theological basis of moral discourse. Berdyaev believes that aspects of the Spirit are shackled within Caesar's reign, and teaches that a radical stripping away of its secular trappings is required.

A final, practical ramification of associating Christianity with an anarchic disturbance is the ability to communicate dissatisfaction with the basic concept of secular government. Peter Marshall reminds us: 'anarchists believe not only that power corrupts, and power corrupts absolutely, but that power destroys both the executioner and victim of power'.<sup>100</sup> From the perspective of Christianity, the victim of political power is not only the man who is wronged by bureaucracy, but also the man who feels a sense of moral satisfaction in his lawful abiding. It is easy for the law-keeping atheist to harbour an apathetic approach to divine Salvation, having experienced an impression of justification and righteousness through the law. The Christian endorsement of secular morality can additionally generate the common misconception that Christianity is about redemption through works and observing rules. Berdyaev's concatenation of anarchy and Christianity prevents the spread of this fallacy and promotes an imaginative undoing of the values, practices and goals of the kingdom of Caesar.

Accordingly, it seems appropriate for the Christian to use Berdyaev's dramatic language to respond to the command to overcome the world in light of the conviction of things to come. Working from the conclusions reached regarding the distinction between the two realms and the effect of living in the freedom of messianic time, it follows that orthodox Christian thought is in line with Berdyaev's conviction that the coming of God's Kingdom terminates the authority of the kingdom of man. The book of Revelation declares 'the former things have passed away',<sup>101</sup> until this is fully constituted Christians

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<sup>100</sup> Peter Marshall, *A History of Anarchy*, p. 45.

<sup>101</sup> Revelation 21:4.

seem called imaginatively to transcend the authority of sin, death and secular government in order to fulfil the command: 'Put to death all that is earthly in you'.<sup>102</sup>

#### **v) Constructive Disturbance**

*Behold the kingdom of God is in the midst of you*

Luke 17:21

When we think of political anarchy, we tend to imagine an ideology which breaks, defies or deconstructs, and would not normally perhaps conceive of a restorative or reconstructive dimension to anarchy. Whilst it is clear that the type of socio-political disturbance discussed above is indeed a vital anarchic component, Berdyaev advances the idea that Christian anarchy also transforms and restores the world it has deconstructed. 'The new aeon', he observes, 'does not simply belong to the other world, to the other side of the grave, it is not something entirely different. It is also our world enlightened and transfigured and which has become creatively free'.<sup>103</sup> Although this might appear to be an unlikely aspect of anarchy, Marshall has indicated that anarchy is not simply the moment of defiance, but the on-going 'condition of a people living'. Anarchy *does* break, but for Berdyaev it is in order to rebuild; it *is* defiant, but so that it can reclaim; it intentionally unsettles, but always with the desire to transform.

This process of disturbing in order to recreate has something in common with Tolkien's description of fairy-tales, which he believes follows the pattern of 'escape, recovery and consolation'.<sup>104</sup> In her essay, 'Apologetics and the Imagination: Making Strange' Alison Milbank discusses the first two aspects of Tolkien's three-fold definition, explaining: 'Escape speaks to our desire to burst the limits of our ordinary experience [...] The second function, recovery, returns us to our own world but seen in a new

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<sup>102</sup> Colossians 3:5.

<sup>103</sup> Nicholas Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, p. 153.

<sup>104</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories' in *A Tolkien Miscellany* (New York: SFBC, 2002), p. 128.

way'.<sup>105</sup> This pattern of disturbing the ordinary in order to accomplish its creative revision, as we will see, is a close echo of Berdyaev's account of Christian anarchy, which, having 'burst the limits' of the conventional, then seeks to restore and reveal the holy within the everyday.

Tolkien's model—in particular the aspect of recovery—can also help to convey the effect of the end of the *Alice* stories upon the reader's imagination. We have discussed how the *Alice* narratives both culminate in revolt. Without wanting to undercut this violent climax it would be misleading to leave the discussion there, since in neither book is the end of Alice's adventures the close of the story. The aim of recovery, Tolkien concludes, is to free the mundane 'from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity'.<sup>106</sup> In a similar way, Carroll closes both stories by appealing to dream and memory which, as before, disturbs the world of sense, but this time in order to awaken an appreciation of the marvellous within the commonplace rather than simply overturning or undermining its governing principles. We might allude to Coleridge's description of Wordsworth's poetry as representative of literature's transformative potential, and endeavour to find out if Carroll's nonsense has the same ability: 'to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural'.<sup>107</sup>

In the first book Alice wakes from the dream-world and relays the dream to her sister. This affects the sister's experience of the real world, which becomes oddly enchanted by Alice's tale. Carroll tells us the sister 'began dreaming after a fashion [...] the whole place around her became alive with the strange creatures of her little sister's dream'.<sup>108</sup> There is confusion here between dream and reality—her senses appear bewitched as she experiences aspects of Alice's adventures for herself in a semi-

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<sup>105</sup> Alison Milbank, 'Apologetics and the Imagination: Making Strange', p. 39.

<sup>106</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories', p. 129.

<sup>107</sup> S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, p. 314.

<sup>108</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, p. 98.

conscious state where fantasy and dream crossover into the commonplace.<sup>109</sup> Still, the idea of transformation in the first novel is somewhat limited, for although the sister ‘half believed herself in Wonderland’ she anticipates that when she opens her eyes ‘all would change to dull reality—the grass would be only rustling in the wind [...] the rattling teacups would change to tinkling sheep-bells’.<sup>110</sup> Nevertheless, despite the return to the quotidian, Alice’s nonsense tale has brought, albeit fleetingly, a ‘charm of novelty to things of every day’.

By the close of *Through the Looking-Glass*, however, the transformation of the commonplace has been intensified and Carroll never fixedly establishes the demarcation between the dream world and reality. The book ends with a poem that not only reflects on a distant fantasy but draws the past into his present. Carroll acknowledges on the one hand that his reality has returned to the mundane: ‘Long had paled that sunny sky/Autumn frosts have slain July’. Yet he also indicates, on the other hand, that a sense of the wondrous lingers or returns:

A boat beneath a sunny sky,  
Lingering onward dreamily  
In an evening of July

Carroll implies that his fantasy has been disturbed and disrupted both by the waking of his character in the story and the adult awakening of the child, Alice Liddell. And yet *something* has lingered, July has both been slain and yet remains. Carroll accepts that in a temporal sense we are ‘Ever drifting down the stream’ and yet he focuses on the experience of ‘Lingering in the golden gleam’. Hence, the concluding poem is not simply nostalgia or pessimism as some scholars have indicated.<sup>111</sup> Rather, there is a more

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<sup>109</sup> With closed eyes her sister relives Alice’s adventures as the world around her seems to take on elements of the dream world: ‘she could hear the rattle of the teacups as the March Hare and his friends shared their never-ending meal [...] the choking of the suppressed guinea pigs filled the air’. Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> For example Knoepfmacher claims Carroll ‘indulge[d] in nostalgia [...] in the frame poems of the *Alice*’ U. C. Knoepfmacher, *Ventures Into Childland*, p. 157. Richard Kelly believes that ‘In *Through the Looking-Glass* Carroll’s pessimism grows and manifests itself in his depiction of a world where escape is not possible’. Richard Michael Kelly, *Lewis Carroll* (Connecticut: Twayne, 1990), p. 68.



complex interpenetration of disturbance and transformation. Part of the complexity is the haunting experience of memory, for at the end of the story we find no certainty but both a presence and an absence, an anarchic paradox holding together commonplace reality with its simultaneous wondrous re-imagining.

Another way of expressing the lingering sensation of half-recollecting an impression of the marvelous would be to describe it as a sort of ‘homesickness’. Alison Milbank notes how the objective of certain fantasy writers is ‘to awaken in the reader this feeling of homesickness for the truth’.<sup>112</sup> Carroll’s nonsense stories do not end with a feeling of ‘homesickness for the truth’, but they do invoke a sense of homesickness for the fantastic, a sort of yearning after the wondrous, ‘whose echoes live in memories yet’.<sup>113</sup> It could be argued that the feeling of longing here is merely Carroll’s own wistfulness for “‘happy summer days” gone by’,<sup>114</sup> though he does seem to ‘excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural’ by transporting the reader back to their own childhood when the world was strange and mystical. Perhaps this is just a homesickness for the youth we can never recapture; however, the recollection and re-enactment of childhood’s sense of the fantastic can also be seen as an endeavour that endows the reader with the ability to conceive of an alternative version of reality—one of the foremost aims of Berdyaev’s theology.

#### a) The Creation of the New: Transforming the individual

The transformation of the commonplace in many ways intensifies anarchic subversion, since it involves a double rebellion—a subversion, that is, of the original subversion. To put this another way, anarchy, might not simply be an act which breaks down, but a

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<sup>112</sup> Alison Milbank, *Apologetics and the Imagination: Making Strange* p. 33. Milbank is referring specifically to the Romantic project of Novalis.

<sup>113</sup> From the prefatory poem to *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*, p. 103.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

revolution that also rebuilds and re-creates. This contention will be explored by considering the transformation of the self and the re-creation of the world as the counterpart to anarchic disturbance. Within the Christian narrative, rebirth and new life follow naturally from the putting to death of the laws of Caesar. St. Paul explains: 'Now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way'.<sup>115</sup> Berdyaev's understanding of spiritual revolution closely echoes this statement. We have seen anarchy's destructive capacity; we turn now to its creative endeavour.

Berdyaev's concept of creativity has its roots in the *Imago Dei*. Since God is a creator and we are made in his image, Berdyaev believes man's purpose is to create, and like God, to create *ex nihilo*.<sup>116</sup> Berdyaev describes the nature of creativeness as 'the making of something new that had not existed before'.<sup>117</sup> A dominant theme in *The Realm of Spirit and the Realm of Caesar* is the creation of the new man, which I will discuss as the transformation of self. The connection to anarchy is still central in the process of transformation, since the creation of the new for Berdyaev is the ultimate goal of spiritual revolution.

The principle of newness according to Berdyaev is what distinguishes spiritual revolution from secular revolt. He proposes that Christianity alone is revolutionary and that secular revolutions are revolutionary in a much weaker sense or not at all, since he believes that God alone is able to effect change at a fundamental level:

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<sup>115</sup> Romans 7:6.

<sup>116</sup> He explains: 'the creative act of a man cannot be completely determined by the material which is given by the world; in it there is newness that is not determined by the outside world. This is the element of freedom that comes into any real creative act. This is the mystery of creativity. In this sense, creativity is creation from nothing'. Nicholas Berdyaev, *Self-cognition* (Moscow: Kniga, 1991), p. 213 as translated by Dimitri Lisin in 'Philosopher of Freedom' <http://vis-www.cs.umass.edu/~dima/mytexts/suff.html> (accessed 7<sup>th</sup> April 2012)

<sup>117</sup> Quoted by Fuad Nucho in *Berdyaev's Philosophy* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1967), p. 99. It is worth noting, however, that some theologians might object to the unqualified analogy between divine and human creation. Tolkien, for example, would refuse the use of creation for man, since he believes man always creates *ex materia*—from what is already given.

It must be said of political revolutions, even the most radical of them change man comparatively little. We hear much of the great difference between the bourgeois and the communist man, but the victorious communist, once he has got into power, may be inwardly and spiritually, to the very marrow of his bones, a bourgeois [...] Only a new birth, the birth of the spiritual man [...] may be the real appearance of a new man.<sup>118</sup>

Leonardo Boff, though writing in a different century and continent, makes a very similar argument. He considers 'newness' to be a definitional characteristic of revolution that differentiates the reformer from the revolutionary. 'Reformers', Boff writes, 'want to better their social and religious world. Reformers do not seek to create something absolutely new [...] Revolutionaries, in contrast to reformers, do not merely want to improve the situation. They envisage the introduction of something new, the changing of the social and religious game rules'.<sup>119</sup>

Consequently, for both thinkers, authentic revolution is not contained within the socio-political sphere, as here they see no potential to bring about the quality of genuine newness. 'A political revolt', Berdyaev writes, 'is a reaction against the old without creating something new'.<sup>120</sup> It is effectively disturbance without transformation. Garrett Green presses this point in his examination of Berdyaev and implies that Christianity is unable to accept contemporary political revolution because it is not revolutionary enough.<sup>121</sup> This explains why for Berdyaev the social and political components of anarchism are propelled by, and only fully realized in, the Christian imagination. In addition to (and as a result of) the creation of the new, Berdyaev identifies the emergence of personality as another central aspect of spiritual revolution. Paul preaches that the new man in Christ is one who has cast off his 'old self' and received through grace a new and

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<sup>118</sup> Nicholas Berdyaev, *The Realm of Spirit and the Realm of Caesar*, p. 162. The concept of the 'new man' is prevalent throughout the New Testament, exemplified in Paul's teaching: 'if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation'. 2 Corinthians 5:17.

<sup>119</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, pp. 239-40.

<sup>120</sup> Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Realm of Spirit and the Realm of Caesar*, p. 166.

<sup>121</sup> Garrett Green echoes this idea: 'it is clear that Christianity cannot fully express its revolutionary nature in terms of a political philosophy of revolution'. Garrett Green, *A Kingdom Not of this World*, pp. 31-2.

truer self,<sup>122</sup> or to use Berdyaev's terminology, he has gained, for the first time, real personality.

For both Paul and Berdyaev the creation of the new man has an eternal dimension,<sup>123</sup> and insofar as the kingdom of man is bound to the finite, the emergence of personality heralds the presence of an infinite power. 'Personality', Berdyaev declares, 'is a break-through, a break with this world'.<sup>124</sup> As ever, the tension between the two realms is evident and we have seen how this rift engenders a spiritual deconstruction of Caesar's terms. Now it is becoming clear that the destruction of the old self gives way to its re-creation. This is the same language Paul uses to communicate the radical transformation of the self in conversion: 'If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come'.<sup>125</sup>

A final important aspect of the creation of the new concerns the transformation of the will, whereby the freedom of the will imparted by the Spirit combats an individual's predilection to sin. Like personality, Berdyaev defines freedom as an eruption within the delimitations of the realm of Caesar. 'Freedom breaks into this world', he writes, 'Freedom comes from another world: it contradicts and overthrows the law of this world'.<sup>126</sup> It is clear from this that Berdyaev sees freedom as destructive, but there is also room for suggesting that freedom is reconstructive as it restores the creative potential of the *Imago Dei* within the individual. The interjection of freedom to the kingdom of man demonstrates that God is able to enter into and radically re-orient the will of individuals. In the scope of Berdyaev's writing, freedom is one of the most pervasive themes. Berdyaev synthesizes freedom with truth. He pairs it with personality and links it to the

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<sup>122</sup> Colossians 2:9-10 'you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator'.

<sup>123</sup> See for example Berdyaev's belief that, 'the new man is connected with the eternal man, with the eternal in man'. *The Realm of Spirit and the Realm of Caesar*, p. 163.

<sup>124</sup> Nicholas Berdyaev, *Solitude and Society* (1934) quoted in *Christian Existentialism: A Berdyaev Anthology*, p. 72.

<sup>125</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:17.

<sup>126</sup> Nicholas Berdyaev, *The Realm of Spirit and the Realm of Caesar*, p. 105.

creative imagination; freedom is the foundation of both personality and newness. Within Berdyaev's anarchism, the transformation of the will also involves the baptism of the imagination, a phrase associated with C. S. Lewis.<sup>127</sup> Michael Ward explains how when Lewis read George MacDonald's *Phantastes*, it awoke

'[...] Lewis's imaginative capacity for understanding "holiness"'. It led to the 'sanctification of all common everyday things, not by throwing them out in order to make room for some transcendent but alien reality, still less by replacing them with an irrational, fantastic never-never land, but by changing their *meaning* from the inside, transforming them, illuminating them with a different light'.<sup>128</sup>

Ward summarises here the essential point of the analogy between Christianity and nonsense literature. We are not arguing that after reading the *Alice* novels we should try to integrate nonsense aesthetics into our picture of reality. Rather, we are suggesting that they may help us to recast 'common everyday things' in the light of something supernatural or wondrous.

Alison Milbank has suggested that creative imagining has an implicitly theological function, and she makes the important statement that it is not only when our imagination is directed towards the religious that it has a theological role, but considers that there is something in all imaginative creativity that connects the participant to the divine. She writes: 'God works in us through the imagination: it is his instrument. When we consciously imagine, in the sense of making art or poetry, we engage in a similar, if lesser, act of re-creation, seeking meaning and unity in what we experience, dissolving only to re-create'.<sup>129</sup> The pursuit of reading nonsense on one level causes us to imagine in terms which revise the conditions of the familiar world; so a rabbit hole turns into the

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<sup>127</sup> In *Surprised by Joy*, C. S. Lewis describes how his imagination was 'baptized' by reading MacDonald's *Phantastes*. By this he suggests that on some aesthetic level he was drawn to the Christian atmosphere of MacDonald's works paving the way for his conscious intellectual mind to later follow. In Lewis' case the baptism of the imagination was a revolutionary moment in Lewis' spiritual journey. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (London: Bles, 1955), pp. 169-171.

<sup>128</sup> Michael Ward, 'The Good Serves the Better and Both the Best: C. S. Lewis on Imagination and Reason in Apologetics', p. 63.

<sup>129</sup> Alison Milbank, *Apologetics and the Imagination: Making Strange*, p. 35.

portal to a magical world, the common horse-fly is transformed into 'a rocking-horse fly' and a regular pack of playing cards becomes an animated collection of insane characters.

To return to Berdyaev's understanding of the imagination, he believes that the transformation from living under the conditions of Caesar to those of the Spirit is enabled by power of the imagination to alter the perception of the real in order to discover the spiritual reality of the Kingdom of God. Berdyaev explains: 'the unseen world is not a reality forced upon us or compelling us; it derives from freedom of the spirit. And what the free spirit creates, is the most real'.<sup>130</sup> Once the individual has been made free in Christ, his imagination is reborn, enabling him to see for the first time the reality that God's invisible reign is already established on earth. The belief that there *is* an attainable and ideal alternative world, which has *already* usurped the reign of Caesar appears as anarchism to the secular mind. The believer's imaginative transformation of the world of appearances imaginatively suspends the vision of quotidian reality and establishes the anarchic moment wherein the supreme reign is not visibly constituted, in a world where the ruling power is not actually ruling.

It may seem, at first glance, that there is nothing unique about Christianity's imaginative construction of an ideal. Indeed, recalling the earlier example of Brecht, his atheistic, Marxist utopia, as Dickson concedes, 'did share the basically optimistic belief [...] that human society is in a state of continuous flux, incessantly striving towards higher forms'.<sup>131</sup> This legitimises Dickson's description of the utopic dimension of Brecht's work and destabilises the Christian belief in the shattering newness of the imaginative advancement of the Kingdom of God. However, Dickson admits that '[Brecht's] vision does not seriously envisage a state of absolute perfection as a realistic socio-political objective'.<sup>132</sup> This is why Brecht's subversive writing, from Berdyaev's perspective, would be considered only as a *shadow* of the true anarchism of Christianity.

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<sup>130</sup> Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Realm of Spirit and the Realm of Caesar*, p. 101.

<sup>131</sup> Keith A. Dickson, *Towards Utopia: A Study of Brecht*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

‘The idea of the new man, the new Adam, or re-birth,’ emphasises Berdyaev, ‘is a Christian idea’.<sup>133</sup> Hence, the transformation of the individual is not simply a dressing-up of the old self in new clothes, but a spiritual rebirth via the imagination effecting genuine change.

#### b) The Restoration of the Old: Re-creating the world

We have discussed transformation as a force of imaginative freedom that inspires individuals to seek an alternative mode of engaging with the world. Whilst it is both fitting and orthodox to speak of a race of new men, if we end our process of transformation at the level of individual restoration this could potentially lead to two misrepresentations of Christian anarchy: one could conceive of a spiritual race imaginatively elevated above the secular realm; or alternatively it might lead to the idea that Christians see themselves as the only remaining survivors amid the ashes of Caesar. Instead, however, the Bible affirms that the Kingdom of God is *already* transforming and re-creating the kingdom of man from within the historical: ‘The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed, nor will they say “Look here it is!” or “There!” for behold the kingdom of God is in the midst of you’.<sup>134</sup> Thus, what we are looking for in Berdyaev’s account of Christianity is evidence that anarchic disturbance gives way to a vivid restorative transformation of the physical and historical. We are aiming to discover if Berdyaev’s Christian anarchism agrees with Boff’s conviction that, ‘The Kingdom of God is not to be in another world but is the old world transformed into a new one’.<sup>135</sup>

Berdyaev’s theology is sometimes criticised as gnostic and heterodox owing to his sympathy with hermeticism and mysticism. The American theologian Carnegie Samuel Calian raises a characteristic Presbyterian concern with respect to Berdyaev’s

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<sup>133</sup> Nicholas Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, p. 161.

<sup>134</sup> Luke 17:20-21.

<sup>135</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, p. 53.

theology: 'there is within Berdyaev's thoughts a distinct dualism which is not found in the biblical view of the world and which is not without its dangers. This view is the outspoken gnostic-dualistic devaluation of this world'.<sup>136</sup> Critics have suggested that Berdyaev's emphasis on revolution as a spiritual takeover leaves us with a gnosticised church and a cosmologised Caesar. This could imply that Berdyaev's anarchism is not really anarchic enough, as he does not allow for a true restoration of the historical. An orthodox interpretation of 'spiritual revolution' requires a revitalisation of the world from within *and* without. Giving equal emphasis to the historical is an important demonstration of God's ultimate sovereignty as it reveals God's ability to redeem history in a way which both preserves historical reality and transfigures it to become the perfect reflection of transcendental truth.

There are indeed certain grounds for suggesting that Berdyaev perhaps downplays the internal redemption of the realm of Caesar,<sup>137</sup> but this feature is still nonetheless present in his theology and to overlook it entirely as Calian does is unfair. Although Berdyaev defines himself as a Christian theosophist in the introduction to *Freedom and the Spirit*, in the same paragraph he emphasises: 'my purpose is not to introduce heresy of any kind'.<sup>138</sup> Berdyaev describes truth as 'the kindling of a light within being',<sup>139</sup> which posits an eschatological revitalisation of the world. He insists that even for the unbeliever 'there is the experience of the meaning of history, hidden behind its meaninglessness'.<sup>140</sup> This concept of the hidden nature of spiritual truth contributes to its status as anarchic by emphasising that the change has not yet come into visible fullness, but is nevertheless operative in all spheres of life, including the social and historical. This unseen defeat and unobserved restoration can be considered as a creative form of negative positing, which

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<sup>136</sup> Carnegie Samuel Calian, *The Significance of Eschatology in the Thoughts of Nicolas Berdyaev* (Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1965), p. 124.

<sup>137</sup> Berdyaev often appears to place greater emphasis on the deconstructive force of Christianity. In *Destiny of Man*, Berdyaev claims 'The Gospel frightens the world and seems to be destructive', p. 132.

<sup>138</sup> Nicholas Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, Introduction, xix.

<sup>139</sup> Nicholas Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, trans. R. M French (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1953), p. 26.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.



obliterates and simultaneously recreates the realm of Caesar under the sovereignty of Spirit.

For Berdyaev, then, it would be more accurate to state that the revolutionary component of Christianity is not only exhibited in its destructive capacity, but also in its restorative power.<sup>141</sup> He identifies the devastating effects of the victory of Christ as the glorious transformation of the individual, social and cosmic: ‘the Kingdom of God is the transfiguration of the world, the transfiguration of the individual man, but social and cosmic transfiguration as well’.<sup>142</sup> This demonstrates that Berdyaev’s spiritual revolution is not as gnostic as it first appears. Berdyaev *is* concerned about the redemption of the historical, and although he sees the gospel as a destructive force, destruction as we have seen is part of the process of transfiguration.<sup>143</sup>

Both the destruction of Caesar and the construction of Spirit coalesce in ‘the creative transfiguration of reality’.<sup>144</sup> This is the dynamic, paradoxical assertion that at the point of the abolition of Caesar its transfiguration is taking place. Boff makes a similar assertion: ‘the Kingdom of God is a total, global and structural transfiguration and revolution of the reality of human beings; it is the cosmos purified of all evils and full of the reality of God’.<sup>145</sup> Boff implies that Christianity is truly revolutionary because it is *this* world that will be, and is being, transformed. In other words, whilst the kingdom of man is being destroyed and impeded, it is also being enlightened and reborn. This is the paradoxical conclusion of the principle that ‘the kingdom is already present and

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<sup>141</sup> Berdyaev left Russia in 1922 unwillingly, committed to his belief in the redemption of the socio-political. He writes in his autobiography: ‘I never wanted to leave Russia and become an *émigré*, for I had faith in the possibility of the spiritual regeneration and liberation of Communist Russia from within’. Nicholas Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, p. 236.

<sup>142</sup> Nicholas Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea* (1946), quoted in *Christian Existentialism: A Berdyaev Anthology*, p. 216.

<sup>143</sup> Coleridge’s well-known theory of the secondary imagination follows a similar pattern of destructive re-creation. In *Biographia Literaria* Coleridge famously describes the secondary imagination as a power that ‘dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate’ S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, p. 306.

<sup>144</sup> Nicholas Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, p. 15.

<sup>145</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, p. 53.

fermenting within the old world'.<sup>146</sup> The transformation of the world thus involves man's imaginative participation in Christ's victory.

The Church has an integral role in the transformation of the reality and as we discussed in the section on the two realms the Church is both present in the 'old world' and maintains a degree of holy separateness. The transparent language of anarchy helps to make the Christian understanding of allegiance clear. In reference to the status and role of the Church within the realm of Caesar Berdyaev writes: 'the Church is not manifested and revealed in all the fullness of its being and does not realize all the possibilities contained within itself. Its complete actualization and Incarnation will mean the transfiguration of the cosmos, the coming of a new world, the setting up of the Kingdom of God'.<sup>147</sup> This quotation demonstrates Berdyaev's commitment to transformation and not merely disturbance by suggesting that the presence of the Church in the world has a transfigurative power.

The eschatological authority of the 'inwards church'<sup>148</sup> is one example of the Christian attachment to what is not yet, which indicates that the constitution of God's Kingdom is eschatological and inward. Yet, Christianity also teaches that it is equally important to emphasise how the eschaton is already present and manifest (albeit imperfectly) in the Church, the body of Christ. By upholding the already/not-yet paradox, the anticipation of the inwards Church is also conceived of as a present encounter experienced now as a different sort of ruling. So we can see how Berdyaev's description of the 'inwards church' is not entirely divorced from its outward expression, though his emphasis is on an eschatological now, restoring the past and present by anticipating a future reality. The paradoxical status of the Church thus entails the revelatory disturbance of our conventional conception of time and linearity as well as a radical alteration of our

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>147</sup> Nicholas Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, p. 334.

<sup>148</sup> Berdyaev makes the distinction between the 'inward church' (the mystical and invisible elements) and the 'outward church' (the teachings, the history and the eschatology).

concept of power. This creates a direct challenge to the logic of the secular realm, demonstrating that the perverse rationality of Wonderland might offer valuable insight into the Christian attitude of living in the now and the not-yet.

#### vi) Conclusion: 'Embodied Twilight'<sup>149</sup>

In both Christianity and nonsense we have witnessed a lifting of 'the film of familiarity'<sup>150</sup> through an imaginative process of the disturbance and transformation of the commonplace. Our discussion of the anarchic dimension to the *Alice* books concluded by demonstrating how there is a crossover between disturbance and transformation—whilst the dream-world is subverted by the intrusion of reality, remnants of the fantastic linger on and enchant the real-world. Carroll closes his book by asking: 'Life, what is it but a dream?' prompting the reader to question the distinction between sense perception and imagination.

This is also an important theme emerging in Berdyaev's work; it is particularly central in his philosophical autobiography, *Dream and Reality*. Contrary to modern empiricism, Berdyaev believes dream is the objective realm of Caesar, while reality concerns the Kingdom of God. The imagination is therefore critical in facilitating the transformation of the world of appearances and a re-envisioning of the secular realm under a divine rule, which is both present and eschatological. Christianity, as we have seen, does not teach that the Kingdom of God is unrelated to this world, but neither does it claim that it has arrived in full. The era of anarchy is not final; it is a temporary measure describing the current 'now and not yet' condition of the world where God is still to be revealed in his fullness. To return to our conclusion from the chapter on

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<sup>149</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* in *The Complete Illustrated Lewis Carroll* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1996), p. 560.

<sup>150</sup> S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, p. 314.

paradox, describing Christianity as anarchic is a further realisation of de Lubac's pronouncement that 'the synthesis of the world has not been made'.

The anarchic aspect of the Christian imagination thus seems to be in-keeping with the paradoxical as it involves a blend of incompatible pairs; rebellion and submission; human freedom and divine law; integral engagement and absolute detachment. Berdyaev insists on the tension of man's existence, describing the human condition as 'at the border-line between two worlds'.<sup>151</sup> It might therefore be helpful to conceive of the interplay between Spirit and Caesar in terms of twilight. The Christian, as we have seen, is called to not lose sight of the vision of God, nor to abandon the broken world. He is twixt-light or tween-light;<sup>152</sup> 'a being belonging to two worlds',<sup>153</sup> in the world but not of the world; preaching a message which destroys and re-builds. Chesterton uses similar language to describe the state of humanity: 'The ordinary man has always been sane because the ordinary man has always been a mystic. He has permitted twilight. He has always had one foot in earth and the other in fairyland'.<sup>154</sup> From our analysis of Berdyaev's theology it has become apparent that the mental straddling of the two kingdoms requires an imagination of contrary states: a perpetual noetic twilight.

Accordingly, Christianity finds itself in the anarchic era of transition between 'Christianity this side of the end, to eschatological Christianity, which foreshadows the end of this spell-bound world of ours'.<sup>155</sup> Berdyaev insists that 'this is not a period of fear, inertia and frustration, but one of daring and creative endeavour'.<sup>156</sup> The imagination therefore performs a vital role in advancing the Kingdom of God through a corrective disordering or an anarchic re-envisioning of the world in the light of the resurrection claim.

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<sup>151</sup> Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, pp. 56-7.

<sup>152</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary offers both 'twixt' and 'tween' as the etymology of 'twilight'.

<sup>153</sup> Nicholas Berdyaev, *Destiny of Man*, p. 36.

<sup>154</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, p. 46.

<sup>155</sup> Nicholas Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, p. 297.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

Life under the sovereignty of Spirit brings with it a necessary estrangement from the familiar, which is a pattern that as we have seen occurs in nonsense literature where the appearance of things is often misleading.<sup>157</sup> Man's creative capacity to envisage the world contrary to how it seems 'requires', as Berdyaev writes, 'another type of knowing'.<sup>158</sup> This 'type of knowing', I want to suggest, is more akin to nonsense narratives than modern rationality, since both Christianity and literary nonsense demand a cognitive reversal of the conventional perspective. Nonsense signals that the given-ness of reality as it appears to us *can* be questioned. Christianity believes that because there is a post-lapsarian distance between how things look and the ontological 'real', the outward face of the world *should* be questioned. Whilst acknowledging, as ever, the manifold differences between nonsense and Christianity, the following two quotations testify to the aptness of this association. One quotation describes the anarchic element of literary nonsense; the other presents the anarchic dimension to Christianity. Without consulting the footnotes, it is not at all clear which refers to which:

[X] sets out to question received wisdom and in the process it stimulates new ways of thinking. This makes it highly effective for writers who want to comment on, and so affect society, and those who propose new ways of representing culture.

[X provides] liberation from the bonds of the present system of living. [X] takes place by *playing games* [...] We discover with a laugh that things need not at all be as they are and as we have been told they have to be.

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<sup>157</sup> Throughout her adventures Alice finds that things are seldom as they appear, and the more she attempts clarification the more obscure and dreamlike objects become. Such as the episode when Alice finds herself in a shop owned by a sheep. "Things flow about so here!" she said at last in a plaintive tone, after she had spent a minute or so in vainly pursuing a large bright thing that looked sometimes like a doll and sometimes like a work-box and was always in the shelf next above the one she was looking at'. Lewis Carroll, *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*, pp. 154-55.

<sup>158</sup> Nicholas Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, p. 31.

The first is a commentary by a secular critic referring to the purpose of nonsense in children's literature;<sup>159</sup> the second is Jürgen Moltmann's description of the Christian attitude to the world in the light of the resurrection claim.<sup>160</sup> In both cases X could be substituted for either nonsense or Christianity, although neither writer intended to describe the other.

Anarchy and nonsense thus appear to be analogous in the preaching of non-conformity in a non-conformist mode. The correlation between religious faith and the anarchic aspect of the nonsensical imagination ultimately consists in the participant's capacity to think in terms that contradict a secular interpretation of the familiar world. This apparently inadvertent link might tell us something significant about the nature of both nonsense and Christianity. Perhaps literary nonsense could be helpfully used in dialogue between believers and atheists to explain some aspects of Christian faith. Perhaps a more thorough inquiry into the potential ontological significance of nonsense might offer a new and illuminating method of approaching criticism of literary nonsense. I will return to consider these ideas following our examination of the third and final component of the nonsensical imagination: namely, the childlike.

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<sup>159</sup> Kimberley Reynolds *Radical Children's Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations in Juvenile Fiction* (Hampshire: MacMillan, 2007), p. 45.

<sup>160</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology and Joy*, trans. R. Ulrich (London: SCM Press, 1973), p. 36.



### **Chapter Three: The Childlike**

#### **i) Nonsense and the Childlike**

Twenty years after the publication of the first *Alice* story in 1865 Carroll reflects in a letter: ‘The germ of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* was an extempore story, told in a boat to 3 children of Dean Liddell: it was afterwards, at the request of Miss Alice Liddell, written out for her’.<sup>1</sup> For many literary critics, anxious to unearth Wonderland’s hidden meaning, there almost seems to be a disappointment at the story’s apparent spontaneity, as if its whimsical origin is somehow problematic for serious study. Juliet Dusinberre believes: ‘Since Alice has become accepted into the cannon of adult literature it is partly as an excuse for this new attitude that critics have tried so hard to prove that Dodgson meant very much more by his two stories than light-hearted amusement for children’.<sup>2</sup> Dusinberre appears to be articulating a sense of embarrassment attached to the adult enjoyment of a story meant for children and the need felt by many critics to invest the tale with some deeper significance. John Pudney, consulting Duckworth’s diaries, emphasises that ‘Duckworth testified the tale’s spontaneity: ‘I rowed *stroke* and he rowed *bow* [...] and the story was actually composed and spoken *over my shoulder* for the benefit of Alice Liddell’.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Duckworth’s report coincides with Alice Liddell’s own recollection of the event:

Nearly all of *Alice’s Adventures Underground* was told to us on that blazing summer afternoon [...] on the next day I started to pester him to write down the story for me [...] It was due to my ‘going on’ and importunity that, after saying he would think about it, he eventually gave the hesitating promise which started him writing it down at all. This he referred to in a letter written in 1883 in which he writes of me as the ‘one without whose infant patronage it might possibly have never had written at all’.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Letter to E. Gertrude Thomson July 16, 1885, in *The Selected Letters of Lewis Carroll*, (ed.) Morton N. Cohen (London: Macmillan Press, 1989), p. 149.

<sup>2</sup> Juliet Dusinberre, *Alice to the Lighthouse* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1987), p. 60.

<sup>3</sup> John Pudney, *Lewis Carroll and His World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> Caryl Hargreaves, ‘Alice’s Recollections of Carrollian Days, As Told to Her Son’ in *Norton Critical Edition*, pp. 276-7.



We have little reason, then, to doubt testimony of the story's 'germ', and it is important that we establish this as we approach the third strand of the nonsensical imagination: the childlike. In our treatment of the *Alice* stories so far, we have deduced little from the *fact* of Alice. By this, I mean two things; firstly, as we have seen the creation of Wonderland came about as an attempt to entertain the real Alice. Secondly, the reader experiences the stories *through* Alice—we journey at her pace and witness Wonderland via her thoughts and her encounters.<sup>5</sup>

Twenty-five years after the famous boating trip and following the immense success of the two *Alice* stories, Carroll *still* thinks the original circumstance important to emphasise. In an article written on the adaptation of *Alice* for the stage, Carroll again recalls the tale's foundation: 'And so, to please a child I loved (I don't remember any other motive), I printed in manuscript, and illustrated with my own crude designs'.<sup>6</sup> And yet, as Michael Hancher observes, 'whatever his original intentions, by 1890 Carroll had accepted the fact that adults enjoyed his children's books'.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Hancher emphasises, 'no other children's book has been so thoroughly appropriated by adults'.<sup>8</sup> So, without denying that the reader may well be an adult, we still have to deal with the fact that the child is the central character and also the intended audience and ask if this has particular significance for the reader's imagination.

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<sup>5</sup> The same point is made by Cristopher Hollingsworth; he writes: 'The Wonderland story [...] opens with Alice's private thoughts, and we immediately experience action *through* her, not from outside her'. *Alice Beyond Wonderland: Essays for the twenty-first century*, (ed.) Cristopher Hollingsworth (Iowa City: Iowa University Press, 2009), p. 28.

<sup>6</sup> Lewis Carroll, 'Alice on Stage', *The Theatre* (1887). The commercial publication of *Alice in Wonderland*, was also inspired by the request of a particular child, George MacDonald's son, Greville. Greville MacDonald recalls his mother reading *Alice's Adventures Underground*, 'When she came to an end I, being aged six, exclaimed that there ought to be sixty thousand volumes of it. Certainly it was our enthusiasm that persuaded our Uncle Dodgson [...] to present the English-speaking world with one of its future classics'. Greville MacDonald, *George MacDonald and his Wife* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1924), p. 342.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Hancher, 'Alice's Audiences' in James Holt McGavran, (ed.) *Romanticism and Children's Literature in Nineteenth-Century England* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1991), pp. 196-7.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.

Carroll's acceptance that adults enjoyed his books does nothing to alter the centrality of the child, but, rather, Carroll believes, reveals something childlike in the adult reader. In a letter to a grown-up admirer of the books, Carroll writes: 'that children love the book is a very precious thought to me, and next to their love I value the sympathy of those who come with a child's heart to what I have tried to write about a child's thoughts'.<sup>9</sup> This allows us legitimately to expand 'the *fact* of Alice' to the category of 'child'.<sup>10</sup> Carroll, after all, refers to Alice as 'child of my dreams'<sup>11</sup> and it is this element of child, or the childlikeness of Alice, that Carroll recalls in a letter to the grown-up Alice Liddell. He refers to her as 'one who was, through so many years, my ideal child-friend'.<sup>12</sup>

Carroll concludes *Wonderland's* prefatory poem by entreating his muse: '*Alice! A childish story take*'.<sup>13</sup> Here, 'child' has become an adjective. '*A childish story*' introduces the idea of child, not only as audience and character, but as a primary descriptor of the story's genre. At this point we can return to Lecercle, who concludes his *Philosophy of Nonsense* by suggesting that the child is at the core of his theory of nonsense. 'It will come as no surprise to the reader if I say that the content of the myth is the figure of the child (nonsense as a genre is a modern version of the great Romantic myth of the child)'.<sup>14</sup> The conjunction of the child and nonsense would certainly come as no surprise to Chesterton, who begins his 'Defence of Nonsense' from the premise that the 'sense of the abiding childhood of the world [is found] in the literature of nonsense'.<sup>15</sup>

Chesterton describes the world as having the *characteristic* of childhood.

Likewise, in offering nonsense as a genre (not merely a word-game) Lecercle introduces

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<sup>9</sup> Letter to Mary E. Manners December 5, 1885, in *The Selected Letters of Lewis Carroll*, p. 158.

<sup>10</sup> Alice's prominence in the global cannon captures, to some degree, the paradigmatic child of the universal imagination Cohen believes, 'Charles, intentionally or not, got at the universal essence of childhood' Morton Cohen, *Lewis Carroll*, p. 138.

<sup>11</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice on Stage*.

<sup>12</sup> Letter to Alice (Liddell) Hargreaves, March 1, 1885, in *The Selected Letters of Lewis Carroll*, p. 140.

<sup>13</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *Philosophy of Nonsense*, p. 222.

<sup>15</sup> G. K. Chesterton 'A Defence of Nonsense', p. 64.

the figure of the child as a property of the genre. But perhaps the most transparent emphasis on the unavoidable connection between nonsense and the child comes from Elizabeth Sewell, who believes: ‘child shall be that which in each of us, regardless of age, responds to Nonsense verse; Nonsense shall be that to which this child responds’.<sup>16</sup> What Sewell is exploring here is the idea that there is something about nonsense which is inherently childlike, that is to say it is both suitable for children, and exercises some deeper childlike nature in the imagination of the adult. Walter De La Mare identifies this element resonant in Carrollian nonsense, believing that it is in the imagination that the adult reader is able to ‘come with a child’s heart’ to experience this story for children. He writes: ‘It is the child that is left in us who tastes the sweetest honey and laves its imagination in the clearest waters to be found in the Alices’.<sup>17</sup>

The aim of this chapter is to discuss the degree to which the presence of the childlike in Carroll’s nonsense literature corresponds to Christian conceptions of the childlike. This will be done by identifying four central childlike qualities that Alice displays—simplicity, wonder, trust and an aptitude for make-believe—and deciding to what extent (if at all) they correlate with religious ideas. In-keeping with the overarching aims of the thesis I am interested in considering the ways in which the reader’s encounter with the childlike affects the imagination. Let us commence then, by trying to understand what precisely it means to approach nonsense literature ‘with a child’s heart’.

Daniel F. Kirk in his treatise *Charles Dodgson Semiotician* begins from a similar starting point: ‘In short’, he writes, ‘to visit happily in the land of the Duchess and the Red King, one must surrender the attachments to familiar language thinking patterns he strove so hard to form when he was young, for he must assume, once again, the eager simplicity of a child’.<sup>18</sup> In this quotation we can identify a link between the anarchic

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<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Sewell, ‘Nonsense Verse and the Child’ in Wim Tigges, (ed.) *Explorations in the Field of Nonsense*, p. 135.

<sup>17</sup> Walter De La Mare, ‘On the *Alice* books’ in *Aspects of Alice*, p. 97.

<sup>18</sup> Daniel F. Kirk, *Charles Dodgson Semiotician* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1963), p. 68.

element of the nonsensical imagination and the idea of the childlike discussed thus far. Kirk seems to imply that the authority of established patterns of thought need to be overthrown, or at least held in abeyance in order to enter the realm of nonsense. Accordingly, the narrative of nonsensical imagining seems to require an anarchic disturbance of the familiar followed by a childlike re-envisioning of events. This 'disturbance' may be equally described as a matter of happily accepting the nonsensical appearance or suggestion of things, but however we interpret the revision of the familiar it is the child within the adult that conducts the imagination when the world is made strange.

Edmund Wilson believes that Carroll understands the child within the adult or 'the more primitive elements of the mind of maturity' because '[he] is in touch with the real mind of childhood'.<sup>19</sup> Critics have suggested that Carroll's sensitivity to the child's mind is a consequence of his failure to grow-up. Perhaps the capacity for imagining in nonsensical terms, past childhood, is a manifestation of the reader's own resistance to maturity. John Skinner, speaking from a psychoanalytical perspective, proposes that the childlike elements in Carrollian nonsense arise from the fact 'that Lewis Carroll remained at a childish level in his emotional life'.<sup>20</sup> He concludes, 'Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, who did not dare become an adult [...] remained the eternal child'.<sup>21</sup> From this perspective, it would seem that the Alice stories offer adult readers a means of escape from the real world; a retreat into the world of nonsense, the realm of the child. This implies that to think in childlike terms is a turning away from reality.

However, even if this is a correct account of childlike imagining, it does not appear to be an accurate understanding of Carroll's perspective. His biographer Cohen explains: 'they [the children] more than any other force, fired his imagination, and he found, like Blake, that they saw into the heart of complex truths more clearly and

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<sup>19</sup> Edmund Wilson, 'C. L. Dodgson: The Poet Logician' in *Aspects of Alice*, p. 247.

<sup>20</sup> John Skinner, 'Lewis Carroll's Adventures in Wonderland' in *Aspects of Alice*, p. 350.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 359.

perceptively than weary adults'.<sup>22</sup> Cohen's insight reverses the psychoanalytic position and offers instead the belief that the child opens up (rather than shuts down) our vision of reality.<sup>23</sup>

The suggestion that imagining in childlike terms illumines rather than conceals the real begs certain questions—such as, what is unique about the child's mind? And, why place such significance on childlike imagining? If we look closely at moments where Carroll extolls his love of the child, it is noticeable that his adulation is often intriguingly connected to his religious faith: 'The why of the books cannot, and need not, be put into words. Those for whom a child's mind is a sealed book, and see no divinity in a child's smile would read such words in vain'.<sup>24</sup> Carroll further tells us that 'the true child [is] a spirit fresh from God's hands',<sup>25</sup> 'that 'tête-à-tête intercourse with children [is] very healthy and helpful to one's own spiritual life',<sup>26</sup> and that the child is in some sense 'purer, and nearer to God, than one feels oneself to be'.<sup>27</sup>

These quotations indicate that for Carroll there is an important connection between the holy and the child. Although Carroll believes that nonsense should be consciously put *aside* when considering theological matters, if, as Carroll supposes, nonsense and divinity are connected to the child, then it seems legitimate to conceive that nonsense and divinity are connected *through* the child. If this is the case, then despite Carroll's desire to separate nonsense from theological contemplation, the two may prove to be intimately related. It is this possibility that the chapter will explore.

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<sup>22</sup> Morton Cohen, *Lewis Carroll*, p. 107.

<sup>23</sup> An interesting discussion of this theme can be found in Alison Milbank's book *Chesterton and Tolkien as Theologians*, where she discusses Chesterton's revision of the Romantic association of childhood with imagination 'to claim, inversely, that it is children who are the true realists'. Alison Milbank, *Chesterton and Tolkien as Theologians* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), p. 36.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted by T. B. Strony, 'Lewis Carroll' in *Aspects of Alice*, p. 87.

<sup>25</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures Under Ground* (London: MacMillan, 1886) Preface to the 1886 facsimile edition.

<sup>26</sup> Letter to Mrs. C. F. Moberly Bell, September 27, 1893, in *The Selected Letters of Lewis Carroll*, p. 247.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

## ii) Christianity and the Childlike

The suggestion that religious thinking is childlike might seem like the allegation of the sceptic rather than the viewpoint of the Christian. Alongside associations of purity and innocence, the childlike, as Skinner is keen to observe, has connotations of naivety, immaturity and blinkered idealism. Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age* explains: ‘A very common objection of unbelief to Christianity has been that it offers a childishly benign view of human life, where everything will come right in the end, something which the really mature person cannot believe, and is willing to do without, having the courage to face reality as it is’.<sup>28</sup> Unless, therefore, we can discover a coherent scriptural warrant for confronting the world ‘with a child’s heart’, it may be advisable for Christianity to avoid association with the term.

Let us begin with a consideration of the idea of the childlike in Scripture. In each of the gospels, Jesus calls his disciples to become like a child, and on each occasion, this command is coupled with the doctrine of Salvation. In canonical order the references are: Matthew 18:3, ‘Unless you change and become like little children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven’. Mark 10:15, ‘Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it’. Luke 8:17, ‘Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never receive it’. John 3:3, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above’.<sup>29</sup> In each case, the injunction is emphatically expressed as a negative syllogism (if not p then not q). This suggests that the childlike is a more than an analogy of peripheral significance to Christianity.

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<sup>28</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (London: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 318.

<sup>29</sup> The Greek *ἀνωθεν* can be translated as ‘again’ or ‘anew’ in addition to ‘from above’. Although John does not use the word ‘child’, his formula and meaning remains equivalent since he uses the subjunctive tense of begat (*γεννηθῇ*) indicating that the seeing of the Kingdom of God is conditional on being born.

Nevertheless, it could be argued in his first letter to the Corinthians that Paul gainsays this command to be childlike. Instead, Paul seems to encourage the Corinthians to grow out of their childness and become adults in their faith. He writes: ‘When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways’.<sup>30</sup> However, Paul’s reproach to the Corinthians can only be seen to contradict Christ’s commandment if ‘become like children’ is taken to mean ‘become children’. It is necessary for the Christian to observe that Christ instructs his disciples to become ‘as’ or ‘like’ a child. In this sense, John’s gospel helps to qualify the other three references by demonstrating that Jesus is not commanding a physical reversion to childhood, but describing a childlike quality. How essential, though, is such a quality?

In the gospels, this childlike quality seems to be presented as a prerequisite for salvation. The evidence of its necessity can be found in the connective propositions inherent within the gospel commands. In the Greek, both Matthew and John use the conditional conjunction *εαν* meaning ‘if’. Mark and Luke use *αν* as an alternative, which, although without a direct English translation, denotes an aspect of contingency, whereby the action of the sentence is similarly dependant upon the circumstance of the verb. In all four cases *ου* is present, which not only introduces a negative statement, but coupled with *μη* has the effect of making the negation imperative. This reveals that the childlike cannot be ‘bracketed-out’ from an examination of the Christian faith.

Having accepted the term’s significance, it is still not clear what precisely is meant by childlike in either nonsense or faith. The presence of the term has been affirmed in both cases, but the specific characteristics may share little or no resemblance. In order to explore what might be meant by the term from a religious perspective, this chapter will lean on the commentary of George MacDonald, who is perhaps the pre-eminent thinker

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<sup>30</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:11.

on the relationship between theology and the childlike. In addition, MacDonald was also Carroll's close friend and a writer of children's fairy tales and was instrumental in encouraging Carroll to publish *Alice in Wonderland*.<sup>31</sup> MacDonald insists that his own stories are not written 'for children, but for the childlike'<sup>32</sup> and establishes his theology from a simple, overarching principle that 'God is child-like'.<sup>33</sup> In his *Unspoken Sermons*, MacDonald presents the following deduction:

God is represented in Jesus, for that God is like Jesus: Jesus is represented in the child, for that Jesus is like the child. Therefore God is represented in the child, for that he is like the child. God is child-like. In the true vision of this fact lies the receiving of God in the child.<sup>34</sup>

This implies that the childlike is not just a phase in relationship with God, but is the essential and abiding formula of that relationship.

This initial step in the contemplation of the childlike has reached a similar conclusion to that expressed by Angela-Shier Jones: 'for the theologian [...] the journey is not optional. In order to obey the biblical imperative to become like a little child [...] the richness and complexity of childhood must be explored'.<sup>35</sup> However, there are a number of definitional issues to consider concerning the conflating definitions of 'child', 'childhood', and 'childlike'.

The clarification that the childlike is distinguishable from the child is a helpful observation to prevent the creation of 'immaterial fairy-children',<sup>36</sup> where it is presupposed that children possess inherent childlike qualities. Peter Green admits there has been a tendency, especially in the Victorian era, for 'Children [to] become the ideal

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<sup>31</sup> Carroll's diary entry on May 9<sup>th</sup> [1863] 'Heard from Mrs MacDonald about "Alice's Adventures Under Ground", which I had lent them to read and which they wish me to publish'. Lewis Carroll's Diaries (Bedfordshire: The Lewis Carroll Society, 1993).

<sup>32</sup> George MacDonald, *A Dish of Orts* (Whitehorn: Johannesen, 1996), p. 317.

<sup>33</sup> George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons I, II, III* (Whitehorn: Johannesen, 1999) 'The Child in the Midst', p. 12.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> A. Shier-Jones, 'The Never-Land of Religion and the Lost Childhood of the Children of God' in *Children of God: Towards a Theology of Childhood*, (ed.) Angela Shier-Jones (Suffolk: William Clowes, 2007), p. 183.

<sup>36</sup> U. C. Knoepfelmacher, *Ventures into Childland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 157.



symbol of their elders' glutinous yearning for purity'.<sup>37</sup> We could perhaps entertain this idea if it were true that all children embody an unreserved purity, in which case the childlike would be translatable with the child. In a letter to Mrs T. Dyer-Edwards, Carroll expresses indignation at the assumption that he possessed a universal delight in children. 'I do *not* (as is popularly supposed of me) take a fancy to *all* children, and instantly: I fear I take *dislikes* to *some*)'.<sup>38</sup> Carroll thus accepts, along with MacDonald, that there are children who are not in the least childlike. MacDonald believes: 'One of the saddest and not least common sights in the world is the face of a child whose mind is so brimful of worldly wisdom that the human childishness has vanished from it as well as the divine childlikeness'.<sup>39</sup> It seems fair to assume that it is the childlike child to whom Carroll was most attracted. In a letter to the mother of Enid Steves he writes, '*many* thanks for lending me Enid. She is one of the dearest of children. It is *good* for one (I mean one's spiritual life, and in the same sense in which reading the Bible is good) to come into contact with such sweetness and innocence'.<sup>40</sup> From this comment we can further distinguish Carroll's belief that the child (that is, the childlike child) reveals some aspect of divinity and speculate that Carroll perceived such qualities in Alice Liddell, his 'ideal child-friend' and further, in her literary self, incarnated these qualities.

MacDonald makes a similar observation in his paraphrase of Matthew 18:5 ('whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me'). He writes: "'He that sees the essential in this child, the pure childhood, sees that which is the essence of me," grace and truth—in a word, childlikeness'.<sup>41</sup> MacDonald's contention is not that the particular child in Jesus' teaching is perfected in the image of Christ, but that the child reveals the essential childlikeness of Christ.

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<sup>37</sup> Peter Green, *Kenneth Grahame*, quoted by Juliet Dusinberre, in *Alice to the Lighthouse*, p. 5.

<sup>38</sup> Letter to Mrs. T. Dyer-Edwardes, February 12, 1887, in *The Selected Letters of Lewis Carroll*, p. 167.

<sup>39</sup> George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons*, p. 2.

<sup>40</sup> Letter to Mrs. N. H. Stevens, June 1, 1892, in *The Selected Letters of Lewis Carroll*, p. 220.

<sup>41</sup> George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons*, p. 9.

In his sermon ‘The Child in the Midst’ MacDonald explains ‘[Christ] could never have been a child if he would ever have ceased to be a child, for in him the transient found nothing. Childhood belongs to divine nature’.<sup>42</sup> In this quotation MacDonald puts forward the view that Christ is an eternal son since he has an infinite father. In a later sermon, MacDonald develops this idea explaining ‘because his father is his father, therefore he will be his child. The truth in Jesus is his relation to his father’.<sup>43</sup> The sonhood of Christ is not confined only to his life on earth; it is expressed as a constant mode of interaction, both incarnate and triune: ‘I came from the Father and have come into the world; again, I am leaving the world and going to the Father’.<sup>44</sup> Christ’s speech implies that it is his sonhood that is infinite and his personhood (both adult and child) that is conditional.

For MacDonald, Christ’s eternal sonhood authorises his claim that ‘childhood belongs to divine nature’.<sup>45</sup> However, the usage of the word ‘childhood’ is potentially misleading since it could imply that the Christian cannot enter adulthood and remain a son of God. Although according to the Bible Jesus was incarnate first as a child,<sup>46</sup> the focus of the gospels is on the adulthood of Jesus; it is in his adult ministry that he is ascribed the titles ‘Master’,<sup>47</sup> ‘Teacher’,<sup>48</sup> and ‘Lord’.<sup>49</sup> Whilst this is not disputed, John Milbank argues that ‘it is Christ the confused child who dies upon the cross’.<sup>50</sup> Evidently, Christ was at the peak of his physical maturity at the point of his crucifixion, so if it is at all fitting to refer to him as ‘child’ this must be interwoven with his status as son.

MacDonald unpacks this suggestion for us:

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 422.

<sup>44</sup> John 16:28.

<sup>45</sup> George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons*, p. 13.

<sup>46</sup> Christ’s childhood, although referred to with brevity, is still significant to the Incarnation. In the gospel of Luke, Christ is described as ‘child’ thirteen times in the first three chapters, and even after Christ is circumcised and named Jesus (2:21) he is still referred to as ‘child’.

<sup>47</sup> Luke 5:5.

<sup>48</sup> Luke 7:40.

<sup>49</sup> Luke 9:59.

<sup>50</sup> John Milbank, ‘Fictioning Things: Gift and Narrative’, *Religion and Literature*, Vol. 37:3 (Autumn 2005), p. 5.

He who is the Unchangeable could never become anything that He was not always, for that would be to change. He is as much a child now as ever he was. When he became a child, it was only to show us by itself, that we might understand it better, what he was always in his deepest nature.<sup>51</sup>

Thus, the definition established here is that Christ participated fully in both childhood and adulthood whilst remaining continuously childlike, and his childlikeness is linked to his sonship.

It seems that we are now able to affirm that sonship is an important aspect of the childlike. However, if sonship was all Christ intended to convey in commanding his disciples to become like little children he could have done so in many other ways, and with much greater clarity by using the word ‘sonlike’, or alternatively, as he does elsewhere, by using the metaphor of man’s earthly parents to express that God is *like* a parent.<sup>52</sup> One of the evident distinctions between sonhood and childhood is that the title ‘son’ does not disappear in adulthood.<sup>53</sup> It therefore seems unlikely that the childlike, in the context of the gospels, means only the sonlike, as there would be no distinction between any human being and the little children. The child-son is not more sonlike than the adult-son; that is to say, the essence of his sonship is not somehow more true in his infancy. Therefore, whilst it will be recognised that sonship is *part* of the childlike, it is not this quality alone which Christ identifies in the child. It is important, therefore, not to dismiss the child or childhood as irrelevant but to understand that their function is analogical; the childlike is the essential category.

In relation to the wider thesis, we were able to establish paradox and anarchy as thematic elements within the stories. The childlike, however, is more amorphous because the theme is primarily discerned through the character of Alice. Therefore, to structure

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<sup>51</sup> George MacDonald, *Adela Cathart* (Whitehorn: Johannesen, 2000), p. 19.

<sup>52</sup> Such an example is found in the parable of the prodigal son.

<sup>53</sup> A similar point is made by Vigen Guroian in ‘The Office of Child in the Christian Faith: A Theology of Childhood’, where he explains ‘the office of child does not terminate at puberty [...] even at the age of sixty, I am the child, the son, of my father’. *The Vocation of the Child*, (ed.) Patrick McKinley Brennan (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2008), p. 106.

this chapter I will examine Alice's most prominent childlike qualities individually, considering each in relation to MacDonald's theological writings, specifically his homiletic series *Unspoken Sermons* and *The Hope of the Gospel*.

Alice is of course not a perfectly childlike child. Among other fallen traits, Alice displays stubbornness, irritation and pride. But, as Carroll recognised in her namesake, she also possesses certain childlike qualities. Most significantly, however, 'Alice is the first fictional child to escape from the moral-finder',<sup>54</sup> and in being stripped of a projected moral or immoral attitude, Carroll is free to present Alice as a *childlike* child as opposed to a 'good child' or a 'bad child', and she represents a helpful heuristic guide from which to begin deciphering specific characteristics of the childlike.

MacDonald commences his discussion of the childlike from the following premise: 'Nothing is required of man that is not first in God'.<sup>55</sup> He appeals to Matthew 18:5 to provide evidence for his claim: 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me'. He explains: 'For it is *in my name*. This means *as representing me*; and, therefore, *as being like me*'.<sup>56</sup> MacDonald then proposes 'when he tells them to receive *such* a little child in his name, it must surely imply something in common between them all—something in which the child and Jesus meet'.<sup>57</sup> This chapter will be concerned with identifying the nature of this 'something' and the grounds upon which 'the child and Jesus meet'.

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<sup>54</sup> Juliet Dusinberre, *Alice to the Lighthouse*, p. 59.

<sup>55</sup> George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons*, p. 6.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

### iii) Simplicity

Simplicity will be considered as the first point of association between Christ and the child. I will draw upon Carroll's direct connection between the child and simplicity as a warrant for proceeding with the subject, and then explore the biblical relationship between simplicity and faith, consulting MacDonald to see if, and in what sense, he acknowledges simplicity as a childlike attribute. Simplicity has been chosen as an initial childlike quality because Carroll uses the term frequently in his diaries and correspondence to convey his reason for delighting in the company of his child friends.

In a letter describing a photography session with the five-year-old daughter of Dr. Gray, he writes, 'she is so perfectly simple and unconscious that it is a matter of entire indifference to her whether she is taken in full dress or nothing'.<sup>58</sup> To the mother of another child friend he emphasises: 'I have never seen anything more beautiful in childhood than their *perfect* simplicity'.<sup>59</sup> These two letters by no means stand alone in Carroll's use of simplicity as a way of characterizing the child, but they may suffice as a *prima facie* indication of its relevance.

*Alice in Wonderland* closes with Carroll's contemplation concerning 'how she [Alice] would keep, through all her riper years, the simple and loving heart of her childhood [...] how she would feel with all their simple sorrows, and find a pleasure in all their simple joys, remembering her own child-life and the happy summer days'.<sup>60</sup> It is not clear from these quotations what exactly Carroll means by 'simple' or 'simplicity' or if it is very much more than Victorian sentimentality. What *is* a 'simple heart' or a 'simple sorrow?' In what way might simplicity be related to 'indifference' as Carroll's comment above implies? Let us suspend these questions for a moment whilst we look briefly at the biblical usage of the term.

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<sup>58</sup> Letter to Mrs. Chataway October 21, 1876, in *The Selected Letters of Lewis Carroll*, p. 69.

<sup>59</sup> Letter to Mrs. Henderson July 20, 1879, *ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>60</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, p. 99.

In the New Testament, the word *απλους* is often translated as ‘simplicity’ although the Greek also denotes singleness and wholeness. Its derivatives *απλοτητος* and *απλοτητι* are also interpreted as simplicity and singleness. In Matthew 6:22, for example, Christ declares: ‘The lamp of the body is the eye. If, then, your eye is *απλους* [simple, single, undivided] your whole body will be bright’. In a like manner Paul articulates his concern for the Corinthians that ‘as the serpent deceived Eve by its cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and *απλοτητος* [simple, single, whole] devotion to Christ’.<sup>61</sup> The New Testament principle of simplicity seems to be concerned with the teaching that the Christian cannot serve two masters,<sup>62</sup> and that to be a true child of God demands undivided or *απλους* obedience. Theological simplicity thus consists in the ability to give oneself to God, with a whole and undivided will.

MacDonald identifies in Christ this same simplicity or singleness of vision. He writes: ‘his thought was ever and always his Father. To its home in the heart of the Father his heart was ever turned [...] No vain show could enter at his eyes; neither ambition nor disappointment could distort them to his eternal childlike gaze’.<sup>63</sup> Perhaps this can help to illuminate Carroll’s idea of a ‘simple sorrow’ as a disappointment or misfortune, which, whilst acknowledging the element of sorrow, does not upset the simplicity of the ‘childlike gaze’. If the focus of an individual is truly *απλοτητος* then ‘sorrows’ and ‘joys’ become illumined by (and do not detract from) such focus. MacDonald explains that ‘the simple purity of a single affection’ enables man’s personal vision to become a ‘willed harmony of dual oneness [...] with God’.<sup>64</sup> From this it is possible to deduce that Christ’s purpose is always *απλους*, since his mission consists solely in the carrying out of his Father’s will. Such a purpose according to MacDonald is childlike because it is perpetually defined within the unity of the relationship between Father and Son.

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<sup>61</sup> See also Ephesians 6:5 and Colossians 3:22.

<sup>62</sup> Luke 16:13.

<sup>63</sup> George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons*, p. 171.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

For MacDonald it is important to affirm that *childlike* simplicity is not entirely abstracted from *childhood* simplicity. In direct terms MacDonald writes, ‘At childhood’s heart, the germ of good, lies God’s simplicity’.<sup>65</sup> Elsewhere he warns against ‘Forg[etting] the simplicity of childhood in the toil of life’,<sup>66</sup> a simplicity which John Milbank believes allows the child to remain ‘relatively immune to the goals of ambition, possession and sexual conquest’.<sup>67</sup> The idea that children are in some sense removed from the ‘toil of life’ could be connected to their dependence and trust in parental provision, which might indicate that the child’s lack of burden reveals something of the simplicity of divine childlikeness.

This belief that the child is liberated from anxiety as a result of parental dependence has a clear connection with Christ’s proclamation of God’s provision: ‘do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body what you will wear [...] your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things’.<sup>68</sup> Perhaps Christ appeals to the epithet ‘Father’ because of its metaphorical significance; the true ‘child’ of God is assured that their ‘Father’ will provide for them, and so the disciples who heed this message exhibit the Christian virtue of non-attachment to anything other than God. The evocation of the parent/child relationship seems to be a practical way of explaining what simplicity achieved *within* the toil of life looks like. Simplicity is manifest as an unburdened attitude to the world, which frees the individual from a consuming attachment to things. ‘Cast your burdens onto me,’ declares Christ, ‘for my yoke is easy and my burden light’.<sup>69</sup> Although in a sense the Alice stories are not without darkness, the overarching sentiment remains light: they refuse to mourn; they will not be burdened.

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<sup>65</sup> George MacDonald, ‘To My Sister’ in *Poems* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Roberts, 1857), p. 223.

<sup>66</sup> George MacDonald, ‘Wordsworth’s Poetry’, *A Dish of Orts*, p. 255.

<sup>67</sup> John Milbank *Fictioning Things*, p. 4.

<sup>68</sup> Matthew 6:25, 32.

<sup>69</sup> Matthew 11:30.

Much literary criticism on the genre of nonsense focuses on its complex and intricate linguistic games. For example, Kimberly Reynolds emphasises that ‘literary nonsense requires a high degree of technical knowledge and intellectual sophistication for its effects’.<sup>70</sup> Without denying that much of Carroll’s humour relies on semantic puns, the narrative structure of the *Alice* books reveals a radical simplicity as Becker-Lennon observes. She remarks: ‘the utter simplicity of the opening of *Alice* is disarming, and no explanations are required [...] by paragraph three the rabbit has taken a watch out of its waistcoat pocket and started down the rabbit-hole and in paragraph four *Alice* is down after it’.<sup>71</sup> The lack of logical explanation is a characteristic feature of the nonsense narrative, which lends itself to an extremely simple, paratactic narrative: something happens and then something else happens. As Wim Tigges acknowledges in his definition of the genre: ‘[nothing] can be obtained by considering connotations or associations because these lead to nothing’.<sup>72</sup> Although in some ways this seems like an overstatement by Tigges—there is, for example, a link between the egg in the shop and the egg-shaped Humpty Dumpty, however, it is true that on the whole there is no progressive linearity to the narratives.

U. C. Knoepfelmacher in *Ventures into Childland* explains, ‘The structure of “Through the Looking-Glass” relies on what James Kincaid rightly calls “a series of good-byes” in which the parting from the gnat and the fawn “are succeeded by the climactic farewell with an old wasp”’.<sup>73</sup> This structural device also seems to be prominent in *Wonderland*, such as the sudden appearing and then vanishing of the Cheshire Cat, or the abrupt transfiguration of characters such as the baby into a pig. The very fact the stories are dream narratives is often a disappointment to the reader, especially the adult, who may be looking for *Wonderland* as a means of escape, but finds that the tales refuse

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<sup>70</sup> Kimberley Reynolds, *Radical Children's Literature*, p. 47.

<sup>71</sup> Florence Becker-Lennon ‘Escape Through the Looking-Glass’ in *Aspects of Alice*, pp. 104-5.

<sup>72</sup> Wim Tigges, *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense*, p. 47.

<sup>73</sup> U. C. Knoepfelmacher, *Ventures into Childland*, p. 213.



their entrapment. Alice is not in the least disappointed to find out she was only dreaming, nor is she traumatized from her adventure. She merely expresses ‘what a curious dream!’

My point here is not that there is any formal theology in the structural lightness of the dream narrative, but that engagement in nonsense literature encourages the reader to imagine in terms of non-attachment. Like Alice, the reader must become accustomed to letting go of expectations and not getting weighed down by negative emotions. The reader is expected to approach new situations in the story without the learned anxiety that comes from allowing past traumatic experiences to dictate present attitude. Whether kings, caterpillars or mad hatters, Alice engages each with the same straight-forward simplicity, unfractured by ‘goals of ambition, possession and sexual conquest’. According to W. H. Auden, the simplicity of Alice’s character is a symbol of ‘what, after many years and countless follies and errors, one would like, in the end, to become’.<sup>74</sup> Alice draws the reader into an experience of wholeness, which provides (albeit inadvertently) an analogous participation in Christian simplicity.

To refer back to our original question: would it make sense for Christ to say ‘unless you change and become *simple* like this little child you will not enter the Kingdom of heaven?’ It would seem so, *if* Christianity believes in the actual provision of Christ’s promise, then the Christian ought to possess a childlike lack of burden, an ‘unclouded brow’, a oneness of will enabling the individual to enter into the same *απλούς* relationship to the Father as Christ. Simplicity thus seems to be one element connecting the Alice stories to a Christian account of the childlike.

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<sup>74</sup> W. H. Auden, *Forewords & Afterwords* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 293.

#### iv) Wonder

Following the description of her ‘pure unclouded brow’ in the prefatory poem to *Through the Looking-Glass*, Carroll identifies Alice’s ‘dreaming eyes of wonder’.<sup>75</sup> Perhaps the recognition that it is in *Wonderland* that Alice has her adventures, reveals some other aspect of her childlike nature. Elsewhere, Carroll describes Alice as ‘curious—wildly curious, and with the eager enjoyment of Life that comes only in the happy hours of childhood, when all is new and fair’.<sup>76</sup> This abiding sense of newness and curiosity characterises Carroll’s understanding of the child’s capacity for wonder. Alice follows the White Rabbit because she is ‘burning with curiosity’<sup>77</sup> and recalls her adventures as ‘a wonderful dream’.<sup>78</sup> Whilst Alice experiences a range of reactions, wonder seems to be her primary response to the world she encounters.

Virginia Woolf believes that the type of wonder associated with childhood stems from a literal perception of reality. She explains: ‘To become a child is to be very literal; to find everything so strange that nothing is surprising [...] It is to be Alice in *Wonderland*’.<sup>79</sup> Woolf puts forward the belief that Alice is not only immersed in a wonder-land, but in a consuming attitude of wonder, whereby ‘everything’ is strange. This idea could be supported by the fact that her musing outside wonderland is equally wonder-filled. Take, for example, her contemplation of nature: ‘I wonder if the snow loves the trees and fields, that it kisses them so gently?’<sup>80</sup> Her wondering at the snow is divorced from the effect it has on her; it is an appreciation of the thing for its own sake. In addition, her animated perception and quasi-personification imbues everyday events in the natural world with a sense of magic.

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<sup>75</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*, p. 103.

<sup>76</sup> Lewis Carroll, ‘Alice on Stage’.

<sup>77</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, p. 8.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>79</sup> Virginia Woolf, ‘Lewis Carroll’ in *Aspects of Alice*, p. 79.

<sup>80</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*, p. 109.

Alice has no learned immunity to the phenomenon of the natural world for she still exalts in the wonder of the everyday. She delights in the washing habits of her cats as much as she marvels at talking chess pieces or dancing lobsters. This suggests a constant condition of wonderment rather than isolated astonishment. Alice does not experience wonder as aberrant or nonsensical intrusions into 'reality'. Rather, her constant state of wonder enables her to distinguish between the merely sensational and the truly wondrous. Her sense of wonder is not dependant on, nor radically heightened by, the extraordinary circumstances because from her perspective, 'everything is queer [...] Everything is so out-of-the-way'.<sup>81</sup> The important point to observe here is that Alice experiences wonder as a comprehensive vision.

In Ronald Hepburn's essay on 'wonder' he draws a distinction between different types of wonder including 'surprise wonder' and 'existential wonder'. 'Surprise wonder', he explains is an encounter with something astonishing, which disappears once an explanation has been found or once normalcy resumes. This type of wonder, given its contingency, does not fully represent Alice's consuming attitude of wonderment. Hepburn acknowledges that there are 'varieties of wonder which are not undermined by causal explicity';<sup>82</sup> such as 'existential wonder', which he further characterises as 'wonder' at 'the sheer existence of a world'.<sup>83</sup> This type of wonderment seems more aptly to characterise Alice's manner of perceiving the world. Hepburn's 'existential wonder' is closely related to Chesterton's depiction of 'spiritual wonder', which, like Alice's condition of wonderment is concerned with an ongoing mode of perception not isolated instances of particular amazement.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, p. 18.

<sup>82</sup> R. W. Hepburn, *'Wonder' and Other Essays* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984), p. 141.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>84</sup> G. K. Chesterton 'A Defence of Nonsense' in *The Defendant* (London: J. M Dent & Sons, 1901), p. 70.

Chesterton indicates that the spiritual element present within childhood wonder is related to an instinct of exaltation and awe.<sup>85</sup> This could be why MacDonald emphasises: ‘To cease to wonder is to fall plumb-down from the childlike to the commonplace—the most undivine of all moods intellectual. Our nature can never be at home among things that are not wonderful to us’.<sup>86</sup> MacDonald believes the unchildlike are not at home, because the unchildlike do not delight in the mundane. They have lost their ‘simple sense of wonder at the shapes of things’,<sup>87</sup> which for Chesterton and MacDonald is vibrantly present in the child. ‘For grown-up people’, explains Chesterton, ‘are not strong enough to exalt in monotony’.<sup>88</sup> He believes that children, on the contrary, ‘want things repeated and unchanged’.<sup>89</sup> Chesterton concludes that God has the ‘eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we’.<sup>90</sup> This suggests that the failure to sustain a childlike awed appreciation of the everyday is a characteristic of man’s fallen nature.

Assuming, for the moment, that the Christian ought to possess an attitude of wonder even within the most mundane circumstance, how, then, might a Christian respond to the miraculous? We can draw some insight from Christ’s reply to the Pharisees’ demand for miracles: ‘And he sighed deeply in his spirit and said, “why does this generation seek a sign? Truly, I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation”’.<sup>91</sup> Instead, he blesses the believers ‘who have not seen and yet have believed’.<sup>92</sup> It could be suggested that it is a childlike *unsensational* attitude to wonder that Christ desires in response to his miracles. MacDonald explains: ‘Those who would not believe without signs and wonders, could never believe worthily with any number of

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<sup>85</sup> This attitude is particularly prevalent in the psalms, such as Psalm 45: ‘On the glorious splendour of your majesty/and on your wondrous works, I will meditate’. Psalm 145:5.

<sup>86</sup> George MacDonald, *The Hope of the Gospel* (Whitehorn: Johannesen, 2000), p. 59.

<sup>87</sup> G. K. Chesterton ‘A Defence of Nonsense’, p. 69.

<sup>88</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, p. 55.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> Mark 8:12.

<sup>92</sup> John 20:29.

them’.<sup>93</sup> This quotation indicates, perhaps surprisingly, that within Christianity the type of ‘surprise-wonder’ elicited by Christ’s miracles is not the essence of wonderment, and in fact, focus on the sensational seems to miss the point entirely.<sup>94</sup>

To support this claim it might be helpful to contrast the varying responses of the chief priests and the children to Christ’s miracles. Both parties have witnessed the healing of the blind and the lame:

When the chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful things that He did, and the children crying out in the temple, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David!’ they were indignant. And they said to him, ‘Do you not hear what they are saying?’ And Jesus said to them, ‘Yes; have you never read, “Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies, you have prepared praise”’.<sup>95</sup>

It could be assumed that the jubilation of the children after seeing the healing is certain indication that religious wonder is deeply connected to astonishment and marvel.

Although this is undeniably an aspect of the children’s adulation, Christ doesn’t commend them because they are suitably impressed by his miracles; rather, he seems to use them as a point of comparison with the unbelieving scribes. Both parties have seen the miracles and yet the priests and scribes still won’t believe even with signs and wonders. Their indignation indicates that a Christian concept of wonder is not located in the sensational because to those without a sense of wonder even the sensational doesn’t appear to be wondrous. This might indicate that ‘surprise-wonder’ is an aspect of ‘existential wonder’ and that to engage in the former one must already possess the latter.

The Christian understanding of wonder seems therefore to be located in an approach to the world and not induced by the miraculous. It is this attitude that Christ both blesses and identifies within the child, and it is here that Jesus and the child meet. Christ’s Incarnation can be seen as the embodiment of the miraculous entering the ordinary and his life exemplifies the importance of the ordinary within the miraculous. He

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<sup>93</sup> George MacDonald, ‘Jesus and His Fellow Townsman’, *The Hope of the Gospel*, p. 73.

<sup>94</sup> This may account for Christ’s recurring instruction after performing a miracle to keep it secret. For example after the healing of the deaf man in Mark 7:36 ‘And Jesus charged them to tell no one’ or the healing of Jairus’ daughter Mark 5:43 ‘And he strictly charged them that no one should know this’.

<sup>95</sup> Matthew 21:15-16.

subverts the fallen expectation that ‘wonder’ means a sort of gnostic ascent from reality and instead lifts reality into the realm of the wondrous. Chesterton echoes this sentiment in his essay ‘Defence of China Shepherdesses’, suggesting that the function of religious imagination ‘is not to make strange things settled, so much as to make settled things strange; not so much to make wonders facts as to make facts wonders’.<sup>96</sup> MacDonald, like Carroll, believes this is the natural approach of the child, for whom everyday events are as extraordinary as the uniquely miraculous.

This interpretation of wonder appears compatible with the foregoing category of simplicity, since a sensational construal of wonder does not allow the subject to focus on the miracle *per se*, but is overcome by the individual power associated with the ability to astonish. If such astonishment is not also located in the everyday, relationship with God ceases to be *απλούς* but oscillates and becomes contingent upon sensational circumstances. In his novel, *Phantastes*, MacDonald uses the journey into fairyland to articulate his concept of childlike wonder. He explains that one who travels in fairyland, ‘takes everything as it comes; like a child, who, being in a chronic condition of wonder, is surprised at nothing’.<sup>97</sup> It is the type of wonder that leads to a delight in the object itself, rather than in the sensation generated in the beholder.

To refer back to Carroll’s description of Alice, wonder has been described as an on-going approach to reality rather than a momentary climactic encounter, contingent upon an astounding event. The distinction between ‘surprise-wonder’ and a more enduring type of ‘existential wonder’ was highlighted by considering Christ’s reproach to the demand of the Pharisees and the indignation of the scribes even after having witnessed a miracle. We saw how the Bible set these attitudes in contrast to the children’s adulation and considered the nature of childlike wonder assisted by MacDonald whose protagonist believes, ‘the eye of the child, whose every-day life,

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<sup>96</sup> G. K. Chesterton, ‘Defence of China Shepherdesses’ in *The Defendant*, p. 84.

<sup>97</sup> George MacDonald, *Phantastes* (Whitehorn: Johannesen, 2000), p. 47.

fearless and unambitious, meets the true import of the wonder-teaming world around him, and rejoices therein without question'.<sup>98</sup> The perpetual astonishment at the everyday seems to be an important characteristic of childlike faith, and an attitude naturally assumed in a nonsense world in which 'everything is strange'.

### v) Trust

After Carroll defines Alice as 'wildly curious', he describes her as 'trustful, ready to accept the wildest impossibilities with all that utter trust that only dreamers know'.<sup>99</sup> This 'utter trust' may be described as 'credulity' in the sense that Alice trusts without suspicion or wariness. For example, when she notices a doorway in a tree she acknowledges, 'that's very curious!' and then immediately reasons, 'But everything's curious to-day. I think I may as well go in at once'.<sup>100</sup> Alice's inclination to react with trust rather than fear allows her natural curiosity to be satisfied. Her utter lack of wariness over unknown consequences is a clear demonstration of her impulsive credulity.

This is compatible with the conclusions drawn from the discussion of wonder in that it keeps open and defends the child's un-delimited sense of the possible. By this, I mean that Alice's trust in some sense safeguards her experience of the incredulous. For example, Alice asks herself: 'Would it be of any use [...] to speak to this mouse?' She answers, 'everything is so out-of-the-way down here, that I should think it very likely it can talk: at any rate, there's no harm in trying'.<sup>101</sup> *Because* she trusts, her capacity for wondrous experience increases.

The principle of trust therefore extends the realm of wonder by insisting upon the trustworthiness of the incredulous real, and it is this manner of credulous imagining that Jacqueline Flesher believes is requisite for engaging in nonsense texts. She writes:

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>99</sup> Lewis Carroll, 'Alice on Stage'

<sup>100</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, p. 61.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

‘Nonsense can be read at different levels. Like most great children’s books, it is not simply a book for children. It can be read with the freshness of a child or the critical mind of an adult. Yet, in a way, a full appreciation of nonsense requires “a willing suspension of disbelief”’.<sup>102</sup> In this quotation, Flesher seems to suggest that trust is the most appropriate mode for interpreting nonsense, indicating that the reader must practice accepting (if only for the sake of story) wild impossibilities. The reader is led by the child in this exercise of credulity, guided by Alice’s internal dialogue of curiosity followed by her instinctive trust.

In order to find out if trust, like simplicity and wonder, forms parts of the common ground where ‘the child and Jesus meet’ we need to first identify the concept within Scripture before drawing upon MacDonald’s theology to explore this union in greater depth. Trust is in many ways the primary seed of faith. Paul communicates this in his letter to the Hebrews: ‘whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists’.<sup>103</sup> Trust, we learn, is necessary for any manner of union with God, it is not some superior quality possessed by the learned disciple. Specifically in reference to Salvation, John’s gospel records Christ’s emphasis: ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life’.<sup>104</sup> The double use of the adverb ὁμῶς ὁμῶς makes clear the supreme importance Christianity places on accepting the trustworthiness of the testimony of Scripture.

Whilst it is clear that trust is a necessary feature of faith, it is not evident why this is specifically linked to the child. Tolkien’s famous essay ‘On Fairy Stories’ provides some insight. He observes: ‘A child may well believe a report that there are ogres in the next county’.<sup>105</sup> Tolkien emphasises that this is not because the child desires to live in a mythical world, but because a goblin is in one sense just as plausible as an elephant, and

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<sup>102</sup> Jaqueline Flesher, ‘The Language of Nonsense in Alice’, in *Yale French Studies*, No. 43, *The Child’s Part* (1969), p. 144.

<sup>103</sup> Hebrews 11:6.

<sup>104</sup> John 5:24.

<sup>105</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, ‘On Fairy-Stories’, p. 118.



the child, in general, has an instinctive trust. The child's unadulterated naivety is precisely why Dusiaberre believes the child has a noetic advantage over the adult. She explains in reference to Alice's interaction with the unicorn, 'The child's capacity for belief [...] is infinitely greater than the adult's because every aspect of his experience tests it. He has no ground of acquired knowledge from which to divide the phenomena of the world into the real and unreal'.<sup>106</sup> This helps to address the question of whether trust is a necessary criterion for a child to 'understand'. It can be inferred from Dusiaberre's statement that *because* the child's grasp of reality is limited, his verification *must* be based upon an intuitive trust rather than some prior belief system. For Dusiaberre this means that the position of scepticism is unnatural to the child.

In more directly theological terms, Chesterton affirms that a lack of scepticism is required for a discernment of Christian truth. He writes: 'the degree to which we can perceive [truths] depends strictly upon how far we have a definite conception inside us of what is truth. It is ludicrous to suppose that the more sceptical we are the more we see good in everything'.<sup>107</sup> Alice seems to possess the type of intuitive trust described by Dusiaberre and Chesterton: her worlds are full of possibility. "Oh, how I wish I could shut up like a telescope! I think I could if only I knew how to begin." For, you see, so many out-of-the way things happened lately, that Alice had begun to think that very few things indeed were really impossible'.<sup>108</sup>

Within Carroll's nonsense worlds fearlessness seems to emerge as an important prerequisite for trust. Donald Rackin ascribes to Alice a type of innocent fearlessness, which he specifically connects with her status as child. He writes: 'Alice enters upon her journey underground simply because she is curious with the fearlessness of an innocent child 'never once considering how in the world she was to get out again'.<sup>109</sup> 'Is it because

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<sup>106</sup> Juliet Dusiaberre, *Alice to the Lighthouse*, p. 193.

<sup>107</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Heretics* (Mineola: Dover, 2006), p. 159.

<sup>108</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, p. 10.

<sup>109</sup> Donald Rackin, 'Alice's Journey to the end of the Night', p. 454.

Alice is a child', he asks, 'that she fails after all this to see Wonderland for what it is? Is it her youthful ignorance that makes her miss the dangerous significance of a grin without a cat?'<sup>110</sup> Alice does not fear the Cheshire Cat because she trusts in the essential goodness of the creature's intent. She acknowledges it has 'very long claws and a great many teeth',<sup>111</sup> but still maintains that 'it looked good-natured'.<sup>112</sup> Despite the Cheshire Cat's flagrant defiance of Alice's normal creaturely expectations, she still thinks the Cat is trustworthy enough to ask for directions.<sup>113</sup>

Alice's fearlessness, based on her instinctive trust, shares an analogous association with the child of God, who is instructed to be ignorant to the fear that comes from insecurity. 'Have no fear of them', Christ commands, 'for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known'.<sup>114</sup> The focus of Christ's teaching is the trustworthiness of God, which overcomes man's fearfulness. MacDonald comments: 'It is not alone the first beginnings of religion that are full of fear. So long as love is imperfect, there is room for torment [...] When the conscience is not clear, the anxiety may well amount to terror'.<sup>115</sup> This, as MacDonald argues, is a form of superstitious fear which is outside a relationship of trust. MacDonald is adamant that a fearful conscience is the result of 'a lack of faith and childlikeness', suggesting that fear comes from a deficiency of trust in the Father's character.<sup>116</sup> MacDonald affirms: 'The

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 467.

<sup>111</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, p. 51.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Of course aspects of her adventures frighten her. For example, 'An enormous puppy was looking down at her [...] she was terribly frightened all the time at the thought it might be hungry'. Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, p. 32.

<sup>114</sup> Matthew 10:26.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p. 314.

<sup>116</sup> I am not attempting to suggest that the type of fear that comes as a result of an awed awareness of God's supreme majesty ought to be overcome, and I do, more generally, wish to leave room for a positive Christian comprehension of fear, which might help to shape the moral conscience. However, the fear of God prompted by an uncertainty of God's character and lack of assurance of salvation seems to have no place in the Christian message.

true son-faith is that which comes with boldness, fearless of the Father doing anything but what is right fatherly, patient, and full of loving-kindness'.<sup>117</sup>

In his sermon on 'The Cause of Spiritual Stupidity' MacDonald declares: 'Distrust is atheism, and the barrier to all growth. Lord, we do not understand thee, because we do not trust thy Father'.<sup>118</sup> He agrees that trust is attributable to the childlike, and uses the suffering of Job as an example: 'The true child, the righteous man, will trust absolutely, against all appearances, the God who has created in him the love of righteousness. God does not, I say, tell Job why he had afflicted him: he rouses his child-heart to trust';<sup>119</sup> and it is trust that MacDonald links to divine illumination.<sup>120</sup> Thus, when Christ asks his disciples to become like children, he is not demanding an epistemological regression. Instead, he uses the child to demonstrate that it is possible to be a part of the world of experience and yet remain one of the 'innocently fearless'.<sup>121</sup> It is the child, 'impregably fortified in a helpless confidence',<sup>122</sup> who is able to achieve naturally what the disciples must endeavour to re-learn.

Perhaps this is why in his essay 'Fictioning Things', John Milbank writes that the child's 'initial imaginative and intuitive response' contains 'more authority than the adult reflection'.<sup>123</sup> Alice in many crucial ways displays the type of instinctive trust valued by Christian thinkers and we see once more how nonsense might not be the negation of theological truth, but analogous to the type of thinking required for theological insight. One such element is Alice's innocently fearless approach to her adventures, which, considered in conjunction with wonder, suggest that 'the child and Jesus meet' in an incredulous reality approached with 'helpless confidence'

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., pp. 237-8.

<sup>118</sup> George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons*, p. 213.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., p. 353.

<sup>120</sup> 'He who trusts can understand; he whose mind is set at ease can discover a reason'. Ibid., p. 208.

<sup>121</sup> This is attributed to Frances Hodgson Burnett's literary child, Lord Fauntleroy who is described as looking 'as if he had never feared or doubted anything in his life'. *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (Mineola: Dover, 2002), p. 21.

<sup>122</sup> George MacDonald, *Phantastes*, p. 128.

<sup>123</sup> John Milbank, 'Fictioning Things', p. 4.

## vi) Make-Believe

Trust has been discussed as the natural orientation of the child and a manner of perceiving the world, without which faith is impossible. It was suggested that Alice's trusting nature is in some sense responsible for her experience of the wondrous—because she trusts, she increases her engagement with the incredulous. Alice's entrance to Wonderland, for example, is only possible because of her trusting reception of the White Rabbit. However, her entry into Looking-Glass Land is not located in the credulous reception of an extraordinary event, but rather in her own creative appetite for the fantastic: her ability to make-believe.

Let's pretend there's a way of getting through into it, somehow, Kitty. Let's pretend the glass has gone all soft like gauze, so that we can get through. Why it's turning into a sort of mist now, I declare! It'll be easy enough to get through—<sup>124</sup>

and so she does. Here Alice's capacity for make-believe gives way to actual belief.

Carroll describes Alice's make-believe as an on-going gamelike approach to reality: “‘Kitty, dear, let's pretend—’” And here I wish I could tell you half the things Alice used to say, beginning with her favourite phrase “Let's pretend””.<sup>125</sup> There appears to be a self-referential wink in this reference to Alice's make-believe, for in a sense Carroll, Alice and the reader are all playing the game together. Indeed, the dominance of the theme in *Through the Looking-Glass* is such that not only does Alice make-believe in Looking-Glass Land, but Looking-Glass Land makes-believe in *her*. Tweedledum and Tweedledee explain to Alice: ‘You're only one of the things in his [the Red King] dream. You know very well you're not real’.<sup>126</sup> The unicorn overcomes his doubt at the existence

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<sup>124</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*, p. 111.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

of a human child ('I always thought they were fabulous monsters'<sup>127</sup>) by proposing a game of make-believe ('if you'll believe in me, I'll believe in you'<sup>128</sup>).

In order to explore whether make-believe is a theological category connecting Jesus and the child, I want to invoke Catherine Pickstock's concept of liturgical impersonation as a way of explaining the role of make-believe in religious transformation. I will then appeal to C. S. Lewis' concept of 'dressing-up as Christ' in which he discerns a strong correlation between mature faith and the imaginative play of childhood.

To begin with, however, it is not immediately clear why make-believe is applicable to a religious conviction, since it carries connotations of frivolity and pretence. It seems likely that Christians would want to claim that Christ's miracles are authentic, not just mere play, and that his resurrection is not a game, but has real effect for the salvation of man. Yet Miller, writing from a Christian perspective, puts forward the view that 'Faith is make-believe. It is playing as if it were true'.<sup>129</sup> Miller goes on to explain that it is not that religion is therefore false, but that faith is acting 'as if' the unseen were seen.<sup>130</sup> If we consult the biblical outline of faith—'the belief of things hoped for, the evidence not seen'—make-believe can become a helpful approach to thinking theologically because it involves a creative abstraction from the seen reality. Not only does the Christian believe that the reality of creation is mysteriously other than how it appears, but that man's apperceptive mode is also fallen. This emerges as a twofold obstruction to true seeing, which accordingly requires a twofold imaginative reversal: a purified vision of the real and a purified visibility by which to perceive this vision.

In reference to liturgy, Pickstock shows how play-acting is entirely necessary for true participation in liturgical transformation. Make-believe, as a mode of imagining,

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid., p. 175.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> David Miller, *Gods and Games: Toward a Theology of Play* (New York: World, 1969), p. 168.

<sup>130</sup> The clearly supports and follows on from the discussion of the anarchic imagination, which brings about the disturbance of Caesar through acting 'as if' the Spirit is tangibly sovereign.

seems to be a prerequisite for traversing two worlds or the ‘transgressions of domains’.<sup>131</sup> Pickstock accepts that the Fall has effected a radical disconnection between the divine and the human and emphasises that ‘liturgical expression is made “impossible” by the breach which occurred at the Fall’.<sup>132</sup> She calls for a ‘liturgical reform’ that refuses to be ‘enculturated’ into commonplace speech and thought.<sup>133</sup> Pickstock admits a distance between things taken as they appear and the transcendent ‘real’.<sup>134</sup> It is this ‘admission of distance’ that lays the foundation for suggesting that make-believe is required to bridge this transcendental gap.

Pickstock uses the word ‘impersonation’ to signify what I consider to be the presence of make-believe in liturgical theology. She explains: ‘the Celebrant enacts on our behalf an impersonation of the angels in their perpetual hymn of praise. This would suggest a protean ontology whereby impersonation precedes our “authentic” voice’.<sup>135</sup> The celebrant’s impersonation can be considered ‘make-believe’ in the sense that he is acting *as if* he possesses an angelic vision of the real and the ability to break out of the enculturated imagination to perceive this real with the simple vision of the angelic eye. Through the Celebrant’s invitation to participate in his impersonation, Pickstock believes that ‘we *can* enter into purification because we are not simply purified *like* Christ, but, through the gift of the Spirit [...] we *put on* Christ’s own purity’.<sup>136</sup> This putting-on appears as a form of make-believe, which, according to Pickstock is made real through the transformative power of the Spirit.

C. S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* evokes a similar concept of impersonation or make-believe to bring about the transformation of vision. He entitles a chapter with Alice’s reprise ‘Let’s pretend’ and puts forward the contention that the words of the

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<sup>131</sup> Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing*, p. 212.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, paraphrased from p. 178.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 209.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 187-9.

Lord's Prayer 'Our Father' 'mean quite frankly that you are putting yourself in the place of a son of God. To put it bluntly, you are *dressing up as Christ*. If you like, you are pretending'.<sup>137</sup> Lewis suggests that Christ encourages his followers to put themselves in the place of Jesus and act as if they were fully obedient to the will of the Father. Lewis continues: 'It [the New Testament] talks about Christians "being born again"; it talks about them "putting on Christ"; about Christ "being formed in us"; about our coming to "have the mind of Christ"'.<sup>138</sup> The command 'to become like little children' it would seem, also follows this pattern of make-believe impersonation. The disciple is called to assume the character of Christ: 'to be conformed to the image of his Son'.<sup>139</sup> Alice illustrates the child's natural orientation to make-believe, and it is here that a point of union between the child and Jesus emerges.

It ought to be acknowledged that from the sceptical perspective, make-believe is the absence of the real, rather than the transformation of the unreal. Likewise, Pickstock accepts that 'from a non-liturgical perspective it would seem that nothing really "happens" in the liturgy'.<sup>140</sup> However, for a Christian, make-believe is a relevant theological category because of the conviction of the supreme power of pneumatic transformation.

The purpose of appealing to the Holy Spirit is to demonstrate that for the Christian, make-believe is not about regression but about spiritual growth. Christianity is not endorsing a Peter Pan-like refusal to grow up. On the contrary, the Christian is instructed 'to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ'.<sup>141</sup> What I am suggesting is that the playful imagination of the child can be an aid to spiritual maturity based on the belief that the act of imitating Christ is itself a sanctifying process. This is radically unlike Peter Pan's play, which is pneumatically static; it does not develop or

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<sup>137</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, pp. 187-8.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.

<sup>139</sup> Romans 8:29.

<sup>140</sup> Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing*, p. 244.

<sup>141</sup> Ephesians 4:15.

become more real because there is no ontological substitution; Peter is in effect impersonating his own shadow. Make-believe is not, as Peter believes, about remaining a child, but is in fact about becoming.

Alison Milbank describes make-believe as ‘a child’s mode of engagement in adult activity’.<sup>142</sup> Lewis agrees that it is a natural aspect of the growth of a child—‘that is why children’s games are so important’, he acknowledges, ‘the pretence of being grown-up helps them to grow up in earnest’.<sup>143</sup> Christian make-believe, like the child’s game, is not about escaping, but, rather, about a fuller mode of becoming. The Christian imitates Christ in order to grow more like Christ, Christian make-believe is therefore fixed on a *telos* outside itself, ‘Let us pretend’ explains Lewis, ‘in order to make the pretence into a reality’.<sup>144</sup>

If make-believe is successful as a method, then it would seem that there ought to be a terminus to the game. John Milbank, however, disagrees, arguing that play is not something to be grown out of, but a reality into which one continues to grow. ‘Full mature self-consciousness’, he believes, ‘comes at the point where one half steps *back* into childhood [...] back into a flexibility of role-playing in the surer knowledge that one’s *unique* character [...] will shine through many necessary social disguises’.<sup>145</sup> Play is defined here as a fluidity or freedom; it is perichoretic in essence, moving between steadfastness of character and fearlessness of variable circumstance. Meister Eckhart unequivocally champions the perichoretic quality of play in his description of the Trinity: ‘The Son has eternally been playing before the Father as the Father has before the Son. The playing of the twain is the Holy Ghost in whom they both disport themselves and he disports himself in both’.<sup>146</sup> In order for the individual to become like the child, make-believe or impersonation is required to aid the transformation from ideality to

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<sup>142</sup> Alison Milbank, *Chesterton and Tolkien as Theologians*, p. 145.

<sup>143</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: HarperCollins, 2002), p. 193.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> John Milbank, ‘Fictioning Things’, pp. 7-8.

<sup>146</sup> Meister Eckhart quoted in David Miller, *Gods and Games*, p. 158.



reality. He must do his best to be *childlike*, until he is fully-grown, that is to say he becomes an unfailing child of God. The Christian is commanded to impersonate faith until his faith is perfect, that is, until his faith is fully within the play of the Trinity.

At this point we can perhaps establish an order emerging between make-believe and play, which would indicate that the end of make-believe is the eternality of play. From Eckhart's depiction of the Trinity it can be suggested that the childlike do not stop playing, rather their make-believe is subsumed into the infinite play of the Trinity. This is consistent with Chesterton's eschatological vision, in which he suggests that 'the true object of all human life is play. Earth is a task garden; heaven is a playground'.<sup>147</sup> And it is here, it seems, that Jesus lifts up the little child and uses him to reveal the reality of heaven, brought closer to those on earth through the imagination of make-believe.

#### **vii) Conclusion: 'A childhood into which we have to grow'**

This chapter has been dedicated to charting the significance of the childlike in the *Alice* novels and investigating the specific attributes this entails. At the same time we have considered the implication of Christ's instruction to become like children, comparing the childlike features exhibited by Alice with the Christian imagination. Reflecting upon the act of reading nonsense literature, we have suggested that while Carrollian nonsense does not offer religious teaching, it nevertheless seems to provide a very real way by which to engage in something akin to religious thinking. In order to enter the realm of nonsense at all, the reader must exercise a willed lack of scepticism and practice some of the central characteristics of the childlike: simplicity, wonder, trust and make-believe. When we read a story we engage in a type of play-faith; we pretend as if it were true if only for the sake

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<sup>147</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *All Things Considered*, (Fairfield: 1<sup>st</sup> World Publishing, 2008), p. 71. See also John Milbank 'Fictioning Things', 'And in the end, if the whole of the cosmos has a point, or is its own point, the rituals of play and dance come closer to reality than the solemnities of work, skills, targets and means, so beloved of our current masters'. p. 10.

of the narrative.<sup>148</sup> The content of Wonderland, as Carroll fully intended, is devoid of religious allegory, but there appears to be a likeness between the imagination required for Christian faith and the imagination practiced in reading nonsense. The game of nonsense ends and Alice wakes up, but the reader has nonetheless experienced an analogous participation in childlike faith.

MacDonald tells us that God ‘can be revealed only to the child; perfectly, to the pure child only. All the discipline of the world is to make men children, that God may be revealed to them’.<sup>149</sup> For MacDonald, then, any act which makes men childlike prepares them for the revelation of God, and a trip down the rabbit hole seems to be one such instance. ‘There is a childhood into which we have to grow’,<sup>150</sup> writes MacDonald, echoing Wordsworth’s radical privileging of the child’s perspective. The idea that the child is ‘the father of the man’ suggests that the attunement of the mind to a certain childlikeness is not regressive but integral for Christian maturity.

The idea of growing up into a child remains absurd as long as we think in terms of secular development, believing that ‘grown-up’ refers to independence, responsibility and serious endeavour. As we have seen in this chapter, Christianity completely reverses these secular principles of ‘grown-up’, preaching that we must become little children; we must be born again. The mature Christian seeks dependence upon the Father’s provision and surrenders the governance of his life to God.

A final point I wish to emphasise is that the usage of the Christian concept of the childlike to understand literary nonsense does not limit or skew our interpretation of nonsense. Rather, *because* Christianity believes in the theological significance of the child, it frees nonsense to be nonsensical as it does not have to apologise for its connection with the child. Tigges inadvertently attests to the fact that without a religious

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<sup>148</sup> David Miller in *Gods and Games: Toward a Theology of Play* describes make-believe as ‘playing as if it were true’, p. 168.

<sup>149</sup> George MacDonald, *The Hope of the Gospel*, p. 153.

<sup>150</sup> MacDonald quoted by J. Pridmore ‘George MacDonald’s Estimate of Childhood’, *International Journal of Children’s Spirituality*, Vol 12:1 (2007), p. 73.

appreciation of the child, literary nonsense cannot express itself as fully childlike. Tigges writes: ‘that [nonsense] appeals to children does not automatically entitle us to relegate it to an inferior category of literature labelled “juvenile” or “trivial”’.<sup>151</sup> In this statement, Tigges, like so many other literary critics refuses to accept nonsense on its own terms; it *is* trivial, but as we have hinted, maybe triviality is itself an encounter with the truly serious. In a world of reversals where the last are first, perhaps the inferior supersedes the superior and maybe that which is juvenile is closer to what is ultimately mature.

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<sup>151</sup> Wim Tigges, *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense*, p. 5.

PART II:

CELESTIAL NONSENSE

## **Chapter four: Nonsense Theology**

*Would they not say that you are mad?*

1 Corinthians 14:23

### **1. Jerusalem and Wonderland**

This thesis began by asking if there is any theological value in venturing the other side of reason and proceeded to discuss parallels between the Christian imagination and certain central features of literary nonsense. Following the confirmation of our initial intuition that these aspects have some religious connotation, it was then asked ‘can the imagination as it is involved in Christian faith be accurately characterised according to these three features of literary nonsense?’ This led to the discovery that a significant resemblance exists between the imaginative process of reading nonsense literature and willing assent to the Christian message.

It should be emphasised that the thesis does not aim to discredit Christian doctrine by likening it to literary nonsense, nor does it attempt to ‘Christianize’ nonsense by showing its likeness to the religious imagination. A study of the two has revealed this intriguing correspondence and we are now in a position to consider the significance of this connection, and ask the fundamental question: what does Wonderland have to do with Jerusalem? I am not of course the first to have noticed a correspondence. Indeed, the idea that faith and nonsense are in some way related can be found both within a range of theological texts, and to a lesser extent, within the canon of literary nonsense.

The most well-known example uniting both nonsense and Christianity is G. K. Chesterton’s ‘Defence of Nonsense’. In his brief essay, Chesterton alludes suggestively to the central argument of this thesis: ‘the well-meaning person who, by merely studying the logical side of things, has decided that “faith is nonsense”, does not know how truly he

speaks; later it may come back to him in the form that nonsense is faith'.<sup>1</sup> However, like many of Chesterton's brilliant aphorisms, the idea is not developed. Elizabeth Sewell includes Chesterton's quotation in her own conclusion and believes that faith relates to nonsense, 'not as a foreign element but as a necessary extension and completion of our own form of play'.<sup>2</sup> Yet it is only at the very end of her argument that she suggests faith might have a place in the study of nonsense and so leaves many questions unanswered and unasked. 'For thirteen chapters', Sewell concedes, 'we have been logical, only to find at the end that we need an insulation from our own logic which has landed us in the world of magic without telling us what to do there. We need some way of moving from the circle of logic to the world outside the circle, from manipulation to make-believe'.<sup>3</sup> This suggestion undercuts most of her previous conclusions, though she does not attempt to explain how it is that 'words and play together fringe out into liturgy and magic'.<sup>4</sup>

It is therefore unsurprising that Tigges believes that Sewell 'fails in her attempt to bridge the gap between game and dream at the end of her book, where we are meant to reach "the world of religion, magic, alchemy, astrology, poetry"'.<sup>5</sup> Most critics of literary nonsense seem to overlook Sewell's last chapter entirely and engage with her work as if the fourteenth chapter had never been written. This appears to be because nonsense criticism, as it currently exists, is essentially a secular enterprise. It is philosophical and psychoanalytical, philological and mathematical; it may be studied from an historical or a cultural perspective but apparently not a religious one.

There seems to be an unspoken rule that because nonsense literature does not contain explicitly theological language, theology is therefore inappropriate as a means of interacting with the text.<sup>6</sup> Tigges is in a sense correct when he states: 'Absolutely

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<sup>1</sup> G. K. Chesterton, 'A Defence of Nonsense' in *The Defendant*, p. 70.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Sewell, *The Field of Nonsense*, p. 184.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 188.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 184.

<sup>5</sup> Wim Tigges, 'An Anatomy of Nonsense' in *Explorations in the Field of Nonsense*, p. 24.

<sup>6</sup> There are of course other reasons why theology might seem like an incongruous avenue for exploring

forbidden grounds are the themes of sex, feeling or emotion, God and religion, and beauty'.<sup>7</sup> However, the prevalence of psychoanalytical readings of nonsense writing suggests the themes of 'sex, feeling or emotion' may nonetheless be involved in some less apparent way. One might therefore wonder if the same may be true of religious themes. Why, then, is theological inquiry so evidently absent from the canon of nonsense criticism? It may be that the reason rests more with theologians than with literary critics. Perhaps there is a concern from within theology that incorporating nonsense into theological discourse would risk characterising the venture of faith as absurd.

Within theology, generally speaking, there is little formal interaction with nonsense as a possible religious principle, and when the term is used, it is seldom considered in connection to literary nonsense. Catherine Pickstock, for example, enlighteningly invokes the language of nonsense to describe the demarcation in the perspective between believers and atheists. She writes: 'Christ is often represented as a madman. The insanity of the Cross, the non-sense of sacrifice, was a wisdom which drowned in the "rationality" of the world, and revealed there its non-sense'.<sup>8</sup> This shares something with the writings of Erasmus, the ecstatic and insane elements of which have helpfully been identified by M. A. Screech:

The worldly-wise laugh at Christians; human beings laugh at real or perceived madness; what the worldly-wise laugh at in Jesus—not only as he hung on the Cross—is the sheer lunacy they see in him. The world admires money, self-interest, success: Christians, insofar as they turn their back on such values and hold them to be at best indifferent, are turning the world upside down may indeed seem mad.<sup>9</sup>

Although we might be able to see how this equates to earlier definitions of literary nonsense in terms of the anarchic disordering of the familiar, Screech does not employ the word 'nonsense' preferring to use 'insanity', 'madness' or 'upside down'. Ronald

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the nonsensical, for example: if the theological is upheld as serious, weighty and solely concerned with rational apologetics.

<sup>7</sup> Wim Tigges, 'An Anatomy of Nonsense', p. 80.

<sup>8</sup> Catherine Pickstock, 'Asyndeton: Syntax and Insanity. A Study of the Revision of The Nicene Creed' in *The Postmodern God*, p. 311.

<sup>9</sup> M. A. Screech, *Laughter at the Foot of the Cross* (London: Penguin books, 1997), p. 84.

Hepburn's study *Christianity and Paradox*, however, seems to bring us closer to the location of nonsense within theology. He tells us emphatically 'the language of Christianity is nonsensical'.<sup>10</sup> Yet Hepburn does not offer any further definition of the nonsensical except to assert that the paradoxes within Christianity invite the sceptic's identification of Christianity with nonsense. He uses nonsense in the colloquial sense to mean untenable and not to be taken seriously.

The foregoing examples would seem to indicate that the relationship between theology and literary nonsense is at best strained or tangential and at worst a religious distortion of nonsense literature or an offensive description of Christian faith. However, what we have seen from the previous three chapters is that there are substantial and significant connections between literary nonsense and religious faith. Furthermore, we have witnessed a number of theologians dealing with nonsensical themes and critics of nonsense describing such literature in ways that recall the language of religious belief. Nevertheless, it is apparent that if nonsense writers see a connection to theology at all, it tends to be as an aside or a local analogy, unrelated to their main treatise. If on the other hand, theologians adopt the language of nonsense, it is generally as an attempt to describe theological principles as they appear *outside* a religious grammar, rather than as a descriptive category *within* religious thought. This is Sten Stenson's concern in his study *Sense and Nonsense in Religion*, in which he examines the 'absurd locutions'<sup>11</sup> of religious language by measuring them against secular systems of logic.

There is at present no extended theological study of literary nonsense, nor do we find a sustained 'nonsense theology' within the religious corpus. Nevertheless, it appears that theology could bring something vital and original to the appreciation of literary nonsense, and, in turn, that nonsense could assist the communication of theological truths both within a religious context and in dialogue with non-believers. In order to test the

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<sup>10</sup> Ronald W. Hepburn, *Christianity and Paradox*, p. 84.

<sup>11</sup> Sten H. Stenson, *Sense and Nonsense in Religion*, p. 20.



plausibility of this contention, Part Two of the thesis will be dedicated first of all to outlining a theology of nonsense, and, second, to discussing the practical and evangelical implications of this association.

## **2. The Logic of Nonsense**

*My heart shall rejoice in your salvation*

Psalm 13:5

In adumbrating a theology of nonsense, it will be helpful to begin from within theology and then see if nonsense can assist or deepen our understanding of certain ideas. In order to avoid the accusation that the area of theology examined is arbitrary or peripheral; the doctrine of Salvation will provide the theological principles against which we can test whether or not nonsense is a helpful and apposite term. The basic features of soteriology can be extrapolated from the central creeds:

- i) Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man.<sup>12</sup>
- ii) The life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is not a metaphorical event, but actually took place in human history.<sup>13</sup>
- iii) The purpose of Jesus Christ's life, death and resurrection was to be the perfect sacrifice for the sin of man, and all who believe in this are forgiven from sin and granted eternal life.<sup>14</sup>

Before constructing a more detailed theology of nonsense, it may be helpful to offer some introductory contextualising remarks on the apparent connections between Christianity and nonsense more generally, as well as the surprising parallels involved in accepting the

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<sup>12</sup> 'Furthermore it is necessary to eternal salvation; that he also believe faithfully in the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ [...] that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God is God and Man'. The Athanasian Creed composed c. 600.

<sup>13</sup> 'God and Man is one Christ; who suffered for our salvation; descended into hell; rose again the third day from the dead'. The Athanasian Creed.

<sup>14</sup> 'We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins, we look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come'. Nicene Creed, c. 325.

doctrine of Salvation and in reading nonsense literature. It should be emphasised that these resemblances do not pertain to the level of content, but to the role of the imagination as it engages in the act of reading or believing.

Firstly, addressing the belief that Christ is ‘fully God and fully man’, we can recognise this as a breach with conventional rationality since it goes against the law of non-contradiction. The imagination is involved in the process of holding these dynamic opposites in tension and not seeking to reconcile or collapse the ostensible contradiction. Drawing on the information considered in the chapter on paradox, we acknowledged that belief in Christ requires the ability to imagine in paradoxical terms, to uphold two opposing absolutes in simultaneous harmony. A similar observation, as we have noted, has been made by Wim Tigges, who describes ‘the strong predilection of nonsense for paradox and dialectic, for a sustained balance between opposites’.<sup>15</sup> He explains that this ‘requires the non-resolution of the tension between the two meanings’,<sup>16</sup> which appears to be the same dynamic simultaneity that is essential to the imagination of those who would hold that Christ is perfect man and perfect God.

Secondly, the claim that Christ ‘suffered for our salvation; descended into hell; rose again the third day from the dead’ stipulates that these are historical events, which really happened—either Christ was raised or he was not. The importance of considering the historicity of these claims is emphasised by Paul: ‘if Christ has not been raised then our preaching is in vain’.<sup>17</sup> The contravention of common-sense principles is once more apparent; the empirical understanding of the natural cycle of life and death has been overturned and re-envisioned according to religious ideas.

The imagination is involved in the mind’s capacity to reconceive reality according to spiritual principles—to accept a distance between how things appear and how they actually are. As we saw in the chapter on anarchy, this requires a re-orientation

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<sup>15</sup> Wim Tigges, *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense*, p. 56.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>17</sup> 1 Corinthians 14.

of customary thinking as the authority of the laws of nature is imaginatively overturned. The essence of this belief is reflected in the terms that Susan Stewart uses to introduce the character of literary nonsense: 'Nonsense is considered as an activity by which the world is disorganized and reorganized'.<sup>18</sup> The account of the miraculous within Christian doctrine therefore, in this sense, appears to have more in common with the grammar of the nonsense realm than a world governed by empiricism. Cohen describes Wonderland and the world behind the looking-glass as 'mysterious places where characters do not live by conventional rules and that meaning does not play a conventional role. Even the laws of nature, the law of gravity for instance, do not work as they should'.<sup>19</sup> As we have seen, Christianity seems to require a similarly 'anarchic' act of imagining in relation to the miracles of Christ and his bodily resurrection.

The third aspect of the doctrine of Salvation is the conviction that all who believe in the power of Christ's death and resurrection become children of God, who are forgiven of their sin and initiated into an eternal relationship with the Father. From a conventionally rational perspective it would seem that this claim does not correspond to that which is the case: that is to say, believing in God does not appear to alter the believer's mortality; Christians continue to sin, even though it is claimed that Christ has purged them from all sin; and despite the assurance that God is a benevolent and omnipotent Father, Christians are not immune from injustice, illness or misfortune.

To maintain a belief in the salvific promises in spite of evidence to the contrary requires an ability to approach the world in a childlike fashion, which as we saw in the previous chapter is characterized by simplicity, wonder, trust and make-believe. According to Robert Polhemus, nonsense literature offers the reader a similar experience of imaginative transformation:

[Nonsense] plays with and makes light of some of the central locations of humanity's fear. The intention that comes through in *Through the Looking-Glass*

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<sup>18</sup> Susan Stewart, *Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature*, Preface, vii.

<sup>19</sup> Morton Cohen, *Lewis Carroll: A Biography*, p. 143.

is, in effect, the meaning of mankind's comic capacity, and it is this: I will play with and make ridiculous fear, loneliness, smallness, ignorance, authority, chaos, nihilism, and death; I will transform, for a time, woe to joy.<sup>20</sup>

Having established a tentative link between Christian belief and nonsense literature—on the basis of an analogous breach of quotidian rationality—I want to make it clear that I am not proposing that a nonsensical articulation of faith should replace a more rational apologetic, or that the tradition we have inherited from the Enlightenment is wrong. What I am suggesting is that whilst Christian faith is plausible and cogent it is also extravagant, playful and foolish, and that the nonsensical aids the recovery of a number of these currently underemphasised aspects of traditional theology. This is not to say that either system is without coherence or cogency—on the contrary, Christianity and literary nonsense are both systems that possess in different ways deep internal coherence. 'Nonsense', as Deleuze argues, is 'a word which says its own sense',<sup>21</sup> thus suggesting that there is not simply one fixed standard of sense but alternative models of sense, which may appear to each other as absurd. The point has been forcefully made by Kierkegaard, who describes 'the inwardness of faith' as 'an offense to the Jews, foolishness to the Greeks—and an absurdity to the understanding'.<sup>22</sup> To adopt Deleuze's language we might suggest that Christianity 'speaks its own sense' in a tongue that is 'an absurdity' to those who do not believe.

In offering a working definition of nonsense, it is important—however paradoxical it might seem—to avoid seeing sense as its adversary. Instead, as Deleuze and Tiggles have suggested, nonsense involves a balance between meaning and non-meaning, which requires both the disorganisation and the reorganisation of sense. Literary nonsense *plays* with sense and this often takes the form of reversals and inversions of our fixed expectations of how the world works, which, as we have indicated, parallels certain

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<sup>20</sup> Robert Polhemus, *Comic Faith: The Great Tradition from Austen to Joyce* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 248.

<sup>21</sup> Giles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, p. 78.

<sup>22</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript Volume I*, (eds.) Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 213.

religious ideas such as bodily resurrection. In what follows, I want to investigate the idea that the meaning of literary nonsense is perhaps described most accurately as the inversion of the sensible, not its absence or its destruction.

This is an established definition used by nonsense critics. Tigges, for example, describes the art of ‘mirroring’ as ‘a prominent stylistic feature’,<sup>23</sup> which he in turn attributes to Susan Stewart’s proposal of ‘reversals and inversions’ as a central nonsensical device. Similarly, Deleuze lists ‘the reversals which constitute Alice’s adventures: the reversal of becoming larger and becoming smaller [...] the reversal of more and less [...] the reversal of cause and effect’.<sup>24</sup> This more generalised definition has been abstracted from the specific attributes of the nonsensical imagination; paradox, anarchy and the childlike, all which in their own way reverse common-sense assumptions. In the following section I want to ask whether a similar pattern of reversals and inversions are present in any significant way in Christian theology. I will consider both views supporting the analogy between Christianity and nonsense and also confront various objections to this hypothesis. G. K. Chesterton’s interpretation of the Fall will be of particular consequence in this discussion, as will Robert Polhemus’ endeavour to construct an atheistic ‘faith’ using comic and nonsensical literature.

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<sup>23</sup> Wim Tigges, *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense*, p. 56.

<sup>24</sup> Giles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, pp. 4-5.

### 3. The Great Reversal

*For the trumpet shall sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.*

1 Corinthians 15:52

The idea of reversal is a common feature within the *Alice* stories. As one critic observes, ‘Alice found herself in a world which reversed the patterns of the world, and the story of the looking-glass is a story of complete reversal of the real world’.<sup>25</sup> The White Queen explains it to Alice as ‘the effect of living backwards’<sup>26</sup> where to stay still one needs to keep running and to leave a house one must re-enter it. The idea of reversal is not only present throughout the stories, but also in the titles of the texts<sup>27</sup>: *Through the Looking-Glass* and *In Wonderland* (or *Under Ground*).<sup>28</sup> Both imply that there are alternative ways of perceiving reality that shatter our common-sense expectations.

Sir Edward Strachey’s essay, ‘Nonsense as a Fine Art’ (1888) is the first known study of literary nonsense as its own genre. Strachey describes nonsense as the process of reversal and disorder, which he sees as, ‘not a mere putting forward of incongruities and absurdities but the bringing out a new and deeper harmony of life in and through its contradictions’.<sup>29</sup> This is crucial for our investigation, for if nonsense is to be a theologically useful term, it will be necessary to demonstrate that it is not simply a meaningless destruction of order, but rather, as Strachey suggests, it may also function as a means of illumination. He believes that nonsense ‘bring[s] confusion into order by

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<sup>25</sup> John Skinner ‘Lewis Carroll’s Adventures in Wonderland’ in *Aspects of Alice* (ed.) Robert Phillips, p. 347.

<sup>26</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, p. 150.

<sup>27</sup> A similar idea is conveyed by Jeffrey Sten in his essay ‘Lewis Carroll the Surrealist’: ‘For clearly Wonderland and the world through the looking-glass are, even in their names, both vitally concerned with breaking down fences of convention’. ‘Soaring with the Dodo: Essays on Lewis Carroll’s Life and Art’, *English Language Notes*, Vol. XX, No. 2 December 1982, p. 133.

<sup>28</sup> The original title of the story was *Alice’s Adventures under Ground*. Donald Rackin considers ‘Perhaps even the final version would be more appropriately entitled *Alice’s Adventures under Ground*, since, above all else, it embodies a comic horror-vision of the chaotic land beneath the man-made groundwork of western thought and convention’. ‘Alice’s Journey to the end of the Night’, pp. 452-3.

<sup>29</sup> Sir Edmund Strachey, ‘Nonsense as a Fine Art’, *The Quarterly Review* (1888), p. 515.

setting things upside down’.<sup>30</sup> The question we need to ask now therefore is whether theology applies a similar method of ‘setting things upside down’ to ‘bring confusion into order’.

Robert Polhemus, whilst a great advocate of the theme of reversal within Carrollian nonsense,<sup>31</sup> believes that the presence of reversal in the text demonstrates the subordination of its religious subject matter. He suggests: ‘the structure of the game and the plot, as well as the thought and humor of the book, reveal [...] Carroll winning out over the Reverend Mr. Dodgson, and comic regression and reversal winning out over orthodox religion’.<sup>32</sup> If Polhemus’ conclusions are correct, then bringing nonsense into dialogue with theology would not only be a misleading association but would also have an injurious effect on theology. Yet are they correct? Let us consider the assumptions upon which they are based. Firstly, Polhemus assumes that nonsense and Christianity are radically at odds because nonsense is unconventional and Christianity is conventional.<sup>33</sup> Secondly, he claims that the concept of wonder—pervasive in nonsense—has become secularized and ‘Carroll is its prophet’.<sup>34</sup> Thirdly, Polhemus assumes that religious institutions do not overcome ‘the limits and terrors of reality’.<sup>35</sup> It is worth considering these assumptions in detail, since Polhemus formulates with particular clarity the secular standard that currently dominates criticism of the genre, which views ‘comic regression and reversal’ as manifestly irreconcilable with ‘orthodox religion’.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> ‘Once Alice passes through the looking-glass, we move into a world of reversal and comic revolution’. Robert Polhemus, *Comic Faith*, p. 254.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 292.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Polhemus, *Comic Faith*, p. 247. “‘Lewis Carroll’ chose comedy, not institutional Christianity as his light and his true vocation: but to do so he had to split his identity from his conventional self, the Reverend Charles Dodgson, ordained cleric’.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. p. 269. ‘Fantasy indicates, however, the secularization of wonder, and Carroll is its prophet. In a large degree, fantasy flourishes and fantasy life looms so large in the modern era because the past two centuries have been a time of religious confusion and doubt’.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. ‘People need to believe that the limits and terrors of reality can be changed, that the future can be different and better, that wonderful things can happen; if religious institutions cannot do these things, something else must’.

### i) Standing on One's Head

*And when they called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. Then they left rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonour for the name.*

Acts 5:40-41

In *Orthodoxy*, Chesterton describes, 'conventional' Christianity in terms that call into question Polhemus' depiction of 'orthodox religion': 'People have fallen into a foolish habit of speaking of orthodoxy as something heavy, humdrum, and safe. There never was anything so perilous or so exciting as orthodoxy [...] The orthodox Church never took the tame course or accepted the conventions; the orthodox church was never respectable'.<sup>36</sup> Cameron Freeman in his recent monograph, 'Post-metaphysics and the paradoxical teachings of Jesus' describes how Christ's teachings 'perplex and disrupt the history of metaphysics in the West with unexpected reversals that burst through the limits of conventional wisdom'.<sup>37</sup> Chesterton would agree with Cameron's stance and point out that orthodox Christianity cannot assume a conventional attitude to the world because it is radically at odds with the conventions of that world. This view is based on the belief that following the Fall, man is 'born upside down'. Chesterton writes: 'the primary paradox of Christianity is that the ordinary condition of man is not his sane or sensible condition; that the normal itself is an abnormality. This is the inmost philosophy of the fall'.<sup>38</sup> Seen in this light, Christianity seems destined to defy common sense or conventional interpretations of the way things are, and as such, 'unconventional' begins to seem like it might be a more appropriate description.

Chesterton's proposal that man is born upside down takes us back to the earlier discussion of Catherine Pickstock's 'liturgical stammer', which 'bespeaks its admission

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<sup>36</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, p. 183.

<sup>37</sup> Cameron Freeman, *Post-Metaphysics and the Paradoxical Teachings of Jesus*, p. 5.

<sup>38</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, pp. 291-2. A similar point is made by Jean-Yves Lacoste in his essay 'Liturgy and Kenosis, from *Expérience et Absolu*' in *The Postmodern God*, p. 249. 'No one is born the possessor of what is most proper to him, we do not gain access to ourselves without doing violence to the initial conditions of experiences'.



of distance between itself and the transcendent “real”.”<sup>39</sup> Like Chesterton, Pickstock identifies the cause of this distance as ‘the breach which occurred at the Fall’.<sup>40</sup> This gap implies that a Christian vision of ultimate reality may contradict our secular sense of things, even though this also corresponds to that which is the case. To be clear: I am not suggesting that reason is always antagonistic to Christian epistemology; on the contrary, we have maintained throughout that Christian faith can be rationally defended. Nonetheless, it seems in-keeping with Christianity’s paradoxical core that internal coherence should be balanced against the admission that there are certain Christian beliefs that require a different way of thinking, since they break with conventional systems of reasoning. Pickstock argues in a similar manner that ‘the insane figure of God incarnate is the wisdom which cannot be understood by empirical or “logical” investigation, Christ made man, but seen by men as a madman’.<sup>41</sup> At this point we are confronted again with the idea that secular rationality is merely one mode of sense and that Christian (ir)rationality ‘speaks its own sense’, which as Pickstock suggests, cannot be interpreted solely through empirical or ‘logical’ methods. This different mode of thinking, required for Christian faith according to Chesterton, ‘is based on the fact that we do *not* fit in to the world’,<sup>42</sup> and that our natural reasoning is distorted by our fallen condition.

The descriptions of the condition of man given by Chesterton and Pickstock differ of course in a number of ways, though they are both founded on the scriptural account of the same unnatural state of our naturalness and the breach between fallen reason and spiritual truth. Paul explains to the church in Corinth: ‘The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand

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<sup>39</sup> See Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing*, p. 178.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

<sup>41</sup> Catherine Pickstock ‘Asyndeton: Syntax and Insanity. A Study of the Revision of the Nicene Creed’, p. 313.

<sup>42</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, p. 144.

them because they are spiritually discerned'.<sup>43</sup> Paul's contrast between 'natural' and 'spiritual' evident in the quotation provides biblical support for the claim that the imagination of the believer is attuned to a different manner of acquiring knowledge, which in many instances runs counter to 'natural' or conventional habits. The biblical indication that spiritual discernment is a breach with conventional patterns of thought clearly casts doubt on Polhemus' contention that Reverend Charles Dodgson had to 'split his identity from his conventional self' in order to create a world of nonsense and reversals. Indeed, as Chesterton's account of man's condition might suggest, being a Christian he was always already in a topsy-turvy world.

So far, we have understood the condition of being born upside-down as a charter to seek out alternative ways of knowing, believing natural reasoning to be in some sense distorted by the effects of the Fall. Something that is upside down, of course, carries the connotation that there exists a correct way round. Literary nonsense, as we have seen, is only nonsense because the reader recognises a sensible idea or conventional rule to which it corresponds that has been turned upside-down. Susan Stewart summarises: 'in every case, nonsense depends upon an assumption of sense. Without sense there is no nonsense'.<sup>44</sup> From this it is clear that topsy-turvydom is only topsy-turvy if the reader has a strong sense of the untopsy-turvy. For example, Paul Tieck's play *The Land of Upside Down* commences with the epilogue. This is 'nonsensical' comedy because we appreciate that plays conventionally conclude with the epilogue and that there are highly sensible reasons for this. If we apply the same rule to Christianity, the claim that man is born upside-down implies that Christianity must be also be able to provide a picture of what the right way up looks like, and that we can expect this to involve a pattern of reversals and contraries.<sup>45</sup> If this is the case, in particular with regard to soteriology, then there

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<sup>43</sup> 1 Corinthians 2:14 ("natural" here is *psychikos*).

<sup>44</sup> Susan Stewart, *Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature*, p. 4.

<sup>45</sup> C. S. Lewis applies a similar logic in connection with miracles, he explains: 'Nothing can seem extraordinary until you have discovered what is ordinary. Belief in miracles, far from depending on an

would seem to be grounds for challenging Polhemus' contention that the prevalent use of reversal within nonsense 'wins out' over orthodox religion.

Noel Malcolm's study *The Origins of English Nonsense* uses the device of reversal to demonstrate the union between modern and early examples of nonsense. Significantly, Malcolm traces the link back to the prophecies in the book of Isaiah:

The literary device which presents reversals of the natural order of things (known as 'impossibilia' in Latin and 'adynata' in Greek) has a very long history. It can be found [...] in some of the best-known prophetic verses of the Bible: 'The wolf shall also dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid'.<sup>46</sup>

The prophecies in Isaiah referred to above signal an inversion of the assumed natural pattern of animal behaviour, where the lion uncharacteristically eats straw like the ox, instead of devouring the ox, which we may have expected. We are told by the prophet that leading the revolution of the animal kingdom is a little child,<sup>47</sup> an image that frustrates our expectation of leadership. For the believer, prophetic references to the reversal of natural order have a soteriological function, as they are seen as a reference to the eschaton, when the present (fallen) working order of the natural world will be changed.<sup>48</sup> Since such prophecies tell us something about the nature of the world 'the right way up,' it will be worth considering some of the particulars.

Death, for example, is a condition established as a result of the Fall: 'By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust and to dust you shall return'.<sup>49</sup> The Old Testament delivers the message that this fallen order is not God's final plan for mankind and this is attested to in the salvific prophecies: 'Your dead shall live;

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ignorance of the laws of nature, is only possible in so far as those laws are known'. C. S. Lewis, *Miracles*, p. 51.

<sup>46</sup> Noel Malcolm, *The Origins of English Nonsense* (London: HarperCollins, 1997), pp. 78-9.

<sup>47</sup> Isaiah 11:6.

<sup>48</sup> See Romans 8:21: 'When 'the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God'.

<sup>49</sup> Genesis 3:19.

their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy'.<sup>50</sup> The New Testament reveals Christ as the manifestation of God's promise to reverse the chaotic conditions of the Fall. His miracles can be seen as the revelation of a new order and as the counteraction of the curse from Genesis. Such an example might be the raising of Lazarus from the dead,<sup>51</sup> which Isaiah prophesies. However, it is the death and resurrection of Christ himself which is the herald of 'the great reversal' when the old order of death and sin is fully and ultimately overturned. Paul expresses this in his letter to the Romans: 'Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all'.<sup>52</sup>

The transformation of death into life is just one illustration of the biblical overturning of conventional expectations: ordinary human reasoning tells us that the dead ought to stay dead; that death is the natural and inevitable course. The resurrection is a miraculous event in the sense that it is a breach or interference with the laws of nature—that is, assuming we define 'miracle' thus. This traditional definition of the miraculous as the interruption of the regulative principles of nature is not unanimously agreed upon within the Christian tradition. It is, for example, slightly modified by George MacDonald, who acknowledges that Christ's miracles and his resurrection seem *as if* they interfere with the laws of nature, but argues that 'A higher condition of harmony with law, may one day enable us to do things which must now *appear* an interruption of law'.<sup>53</sup> In other words, Macdonald believes that the miracles of Christ's ministry and pre-eminently of Easter are not the *suspension* of the natural order but the *restoration* of that order. As a

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<sup>50</sup> Isaiah 26:19.

<sup>51</sup> John 11:38-44.

<sup>52</sup> Romans 6:8-10.

<sup>53</sup> George MacDonald, *Miracles of Our Lord*, p. 53.

result, the supernatural world of healing and resurrection is in a sense more truly ‘natural’ than the fallen conditions of sickness and death.

MacDonald’s inversion of the status of the natural helps to shed light on Chesterton’s declaration that Christianity emphasises ‘the unnaturalness of everything in light of the supernatural’.<sup>54</sup> In the section on anarchy, we witnessed a similar ‘corrective disordering’ and discussed how God’s supreme order appears anarchic within a fallen world. In this chapter we have observed how God’s restoration of the natural world seems like a breaking-in of the supernatural or unnatural. What this implies is that to restore something that is upside-down to its right way up requires a radical reversal, and if that something has always been upside-down, it sounds like nonsense to suggest it was the wrong way up in the first place.

It should of course be mentioned that salvation is not *just* a reversal or counteraction—it more than simply returns us to how things were before. The transition from the Garden of Eden to the New Jerusalem is a return with difference. In one sense the New Jerusalem is the reconstitution of Eden with ‘the tree of life’ at the centre.<sup>55</sup> But in another sense ‘the new heaven’ and ‘new earth’<sup>56</sup> reveal something other and there is a transformation that is not merely an edenic replica. In Genesis the overarching imagery depicts the harmony and majesty of the natural world, Revelation, on the other hand speaks of a community of believers, a holy city within which the tree of life is restored. Yet, without losing sight of the idea that transformation is not merely opposition, it still seems useful to draw to the language of reversal in order to illustrate how radically alternative the concept of Eden and the New Jerusalem appear to us within our current fallen world.

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<sup>54</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, p. 145.

<sup>55</sup> Revelation 22: 2.

<sup>56</sup> ‘Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and the sea was no more’. Revelation 21:1.

To return to MacDonald's inversion of the status of the natural, the point I am trying to establish is that from a Christian perspective, the first place is not the first place, but a post-edenic, unnatural topsy-turvydom. In such a context, to speak of that which is 'natural' or 'the right way up', it may thus be necessary to speak nonsensically. This may be why a dominant aspect of Christ's ministry is concerned with turning conventional principles upside-down. According to the standards of secular order, the mighty are powerful, the hungry are empty and the wise govern the foolish. However, the New Testament teaches that 'God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise',<sup>57</sup> and that the mighty are brought down from their thrones, whilst the humble are exalted; the hungry are filled and it is the rich who are empty.<sup>58</sup> Cameron Freeman draws the reader's attention to the prevalent pattern of reversals and believes that this awakens in the individual a sense of the absurd. He explains: 'in accordance with the paradoxical reversals of meaning and expectation that Jesus used to jolt open the awareness of his audience, then, the truth will strike us as deeply absurd and come to us as something we did not see coming'.<sup>59</sup> It is interesting for our project that Freeman draws the same conclusion concerning the absurdity of Christ's message and yet suggests that its very absurdity is—in a counter-intuitive sense—a mark of Christian authenticity.

It might be helpful to describe Jesus' paradoxical teachings as 'anastrophic', insofar as the normal, established patterns of society have been inverted and re-arranged. Anastrophe is usually classified as a rhetorical device that alters the order of words in a sentence, 'a preposterous order, or a backward setting of words',<sup>60</sup> a device, unsurprisingly, utilized by writers of literary nonsense.<sup>61</sup> However, the Bible uses

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<sup>57</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:27.

<sup>58</sup> 'He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away'. Luke 1:52-3.

<sup>59</sup> Cameron Freeman, *Post-Metaphysics and the Paradoxical Teachings of Jesus*, p. 248.

<sup>60</sup> The *OED* provides the following example: *All Italy about I went*, which is contrary to plain order, *I went about all Italy*.

<sup>61</sup> For example see Carroll's 'Jabberwocky' poem: 'Long time the manxome foe he sought. / So rested he by the Tumtum tree'. Lewis Carroll, *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*, p. 118.

anastrophe (ἀναστρέφω) to mean to turn upside down, to overturn or to turn back. When Jesus casts the vendors out of the temple, ἀναστρέφω is the word used to describe the overturning of the tables.<sup>62</sup> Its derivative στρέφω is used in connection with conversion, implying that to become a Christian requires a complete overthrowing and turning upside-down of the old self. Matthew's gospel, for example, uses στρέφω to emphasise the radical nature of conversion: 'unless you change [στρέφω] and become like little children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven'.<sup>63</sup>

This correspondence between ἀναστρέφω and στρέφω suggests that the overturning of tables can act as both a linguistic and visual metaphor for the overturning of the heart in conversion. This provides strong grounds for maintaining that the language of 'upside-down' and 'topsy-turvy', traditionally associated with nonsense, is a more accurate description of Christian faith than the common misrepresentation of Christianity as a strictly conventional way of thinking and living. So it seems that far from constituting a threat to theology on account of its frequent use of reversal and contradiction, the application of the term nonsense could actually prove an effective tool by which to communicate firstly, the upside-down nature of man's fallen condition; and secondly, the wholly orthodox sense that to get the right way up requires a topsy-turvy orientation.

At this point it may be worth considering Rabkin's description of fantasy as 'a quality of astonishment that we feel when the ground rules of a narrative world are suddenly made to turn about 180 degrees'.<sup>64</sup> Tigges has already commented that 'Rabkin's definition of fantasy [...] seem[s] to tally very well with the "topsy-turvy" view of nonsense'.<sup>65</sup> My purpose in also observing this is to bring to light the potentially

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<sup>62</sup> John 2:15.

<sup>63</sup> Matthew 18:3.

<sup>64</sup> Eric S. Rabkin, *The Fantastic in Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 41.

<sup>65</sup> Wim Tigges, *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense*, p. 108.

hidden union between fantastic nonsense and Christian faith through the principle of reversal.

Before going any further, however, an important caveat must be inserted: whereas literary nonsense is, in accordance with Rabkin's definition, a 180 degree turn about, within salvation history there is a double reversal at work—a 360 degree turn, in two halves. In other words, the Fall makes things the wrong way round and salvation flips them back the right way.<sup>66</sup> As such, nonsense could become a way of describing both man's fallen order from a heavenly perspective, *and* God's restored order from a human perspective. To each, the other is upside-down.<sup>67</sup>

This seems a bit like the visual paradox of the mirror, where the image in the glass is not an identical representation but the reversal of the original perspective. In fact, it was this peculiarity of the looking-glass that prompted Carroll to write the sequel to *Wonderland: Alice Through the Looking-Glass*.<sup>68</sup> The logical puzzle that Carroll turned into a brilliant nonsense story is, in a metaphorical sense, the same problem that Chesterton confronts when dealing with Christian truth from a fallen viewpoint. 'All the real argument about religion', he writes, 'turns on the question of whether a man who was

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<sup>66</sup> Although as we have mentioned, salvation does not simply return us to the old Eden, rather it is transformed into the New Jerusalem. Yet, the conditions of the New Jerusalem, like those of the Garden of Eden are radically unlike the experience of living in a fallen world, so it is helpful to speak of topsy-turvy realities but it needs to be remembered that the return, though to an upside-down kingdom, is not a strict reversion to the original.

<sup>67</sup> Gavin Hopps makes a similar observation in reference to liturgical expression. He writes, 'From a quotidian perspective, such radically uneconomic caesuras will obviously seem mad or embarrassing and like standing on one's head. Yet in this way, liturgical semiotics hold out a challenge to that perspective – reminding it of, by speaking from within and seeking proleptically to give form to, another world and an alternative perspective, from which *quotidian* behaviour seems like madness and standing on one's head'. 'Romantic Invocation: A Form of Impossibility' in Alan Rawes, (ed.) *Romanticism and Form* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 49.

<sup>68</sup> 'When Dodgson was in London, he met a little girl, Alice Raikes. He invited her indoors, put an orange in her right hand and asked her in which hand she was holding it. Then, he put her in front of a mirror, and asked which hand the child in the mirror was holding the orange in. Alice told him that it was in her left hand. When he asked her for an explanation, she answered:—"Supposing I was on the other side of the glass, wouldn't the orange still be in my right hand?" He was delighted with her answer and decided that his new book would be about the world on the other side of the looking glass'. Eleanor Graham, *Lewis Carroll and the Writing of Through the Looking Glass* (London: Puffin, 1981), Introduction, xxxviii.



born upside down can tell when he comes the right way up'.<sup>69</sup> This is an invitation to question on which side of the looking-glass we are—the side which seems sensible or the side that appears nonsensical.

If salvation history is indeed a story of double reversal, then it seems more likely that Christianity would join the talking flowers in the impossible dimensions of Looking-Glass Land than side with the rationalists who reduce heaven and Wonderland alike to a whimsical dream. Chesterton, who finds deep religious truth within MacDonald's fairy-tales, praises this kind of fantastic imagining as an orthodox defiance of the sensible, joyless limitations of a postlapsarian world where flowers cannot talk and dead men cannot rise. Chesterton writes:

It is not that he [MacDonald] dresses men and movements as knights and dragons, but that he thinks that knights and dragons, really existing in the eternal world, are dressed up here as men and movements. It is not that the crown, the helmet or the aureole that are to him the fancy dress; it is the top hat and the frock coat that it are, as it were, the disguise of the terrestrial stage of conspirators. His allegoric tales of gnomes and griffins do not lower a veil but rend it.<sup>70</sup>

For this reason, Chesterton describes MacDonald's fairy-tales as 'celestial nonsense', a mode of creative thinking that seeks to reveal man's upside-down predicament and to bring him the right way round by treating the supernatural as natural.

So it seems that for Christianity, in light of the Fall, *all* theology is in some sense 'looking-glass theology', requiring an anastrophic act of imagination, such as is common practice to readers of nonsense. On this basis, then, it is possible to refute Polhemus' contention that nonsense and Christianity are at odds because nonsense is unconventional and Christianity is conventional. A world in which flowers can talk bears a closer resemblance to a world in which stones can cry out<sup>71</sup> than the conventional realm where both must remain silent.

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<sup>69</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, p. 291.

<sup>70</sup> G. K. Chesterton, 'George MacDonald and His Work', *The Daily News* June 11<sup>th</sup> 1901.

<sup>71</sup> 'I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out'. Luke 19:40.

## ii) The Secularization of Wonder

*How great are his signs, how mighty his wonders! His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and his dominion endures from generation to generation.*

Daniel 4:3

A second reason given by Polhemus for believing that Carroll's nonsense is subversive of religious belief relates to the concept of wonder. Polhemus writes, 'Fantasy indicates [...] the secularization of wonder, and Carroll is its prophet. In large degree, fantasy flourishes and fantasy life looms so large in the modern era because the past two centuries have been a time of religious confusion and doubt'.<sup>72</sup> This suggests two things: firstly, that wonder is an important element within nonsense literature; and secondly, that this type of nonsensical wonder is opposed to the religious.

We have already considered wonder as a childlike attribute, but we have not yet addressed the possibility that an aspect of nonsensical wonder might in fact be hostile towards religion. Polhemus is not alone this contention. There are many religious believers who would caution against the reading of non-moral nonsensical fiction for exactly this reason. In Carroll's own culture, for instance, child educators such as Mrs Trimmer expressed the dangers of subjecting children to fairy-tales, because they were concerned that children would be unable to distinguish between religious truth and fantastic fiction.

Although Polhemus is writing in support of literary nonsense, he essentially puts forward the same case as Mrs. Trimmer, in arguing that the type of wonder presented in Carrollian nonsense is antagonistic towards a religious truth. As we have already observed in the chapter on the childlike, both nonsense and religion offer an experience of wonder in the sense that they contain ideas that generate astonishment.<sup>73</sup> The crowds are

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<sup>72</sup> Robert Polhemus, *Comic Faith*, p. 269.

<sup>73</sup> The *OED* offers a neutral definition of 'wonder' as 'something that causes astonishment'.

‘astonished’ at Jesus’ teachings and miracles,<sup>74</sup> just as Alice is continually astonished at the unfolding events in Wonderland. The potential theological problem is that the wondrous activities of Wonderland evidently have nothing to do with God’s power. Moreover, in some instances, wonder seems to be a device used in nonsense literature as a way of mocking things of theological gravity.

For example, Genesis depicts man as the pinnacle of God’s creation, made in the image of God, revealing the solemn dignity of each human life. Psalm 8 emphasises that wonder is the appropriate response to the majesty of creation:

When I look at your heavens, the work  
Of your fingers,  
The moon and the stars that you  
Have established;  
What are human beings that you are  
Mindful of them,  
Mortals that you care for them?

Yet you have made them a little lower  
Than God,  
And crowned them with glory and  
Honour.

This finds a comic corollary in Carroll’s nonsensical world where the creatures of Looking-Glass land meet the pinnacle of God’s creation:

‘What-is-this?’ he said at last.  
‘This is a child!’ Haigha replied eagerly, coming in front of Alice to introduce her, and spreading out both his hands towards her in an Anglo-Saxon attitude.  
‘We only found it to-day. It’s as large as life, and twice as natural!’  
‘I always thought they were fabulous monsters!’ said the Unicorn. ‘Is it alive?’  
‘It can talk,’ said Haigha solemnly.  
The Unicorn looked dreamily at Alice, and said ‘Talk, child’.<sup>75</sup>

This seems to be the kind of nonsensical wonder to which Polhemus draws our attention as being subversive of religious sentiment, since it appears to laugh at and make light of a subject of theological seriousness. This is a true and valid point as long as we insist on seriousness as the only proper Christian response to God’s majestic creation. If we look again at Psalm 8 the emphasis does not seem to be on man’s *solemn* dignity but rather, on

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<sup>74</sup> Matthew 7:28.

<sup>75</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*, p. 139.

his undeserved and almost ludicrous dignity: ‘*What* are human beings that you are mindful of them?’ In fact, wonderment or the quality of astonishment can only be extracted from this psalm if it is a surprise that God should care for human beings. It is for this reason that Chesterton believes nonsense is a help rather than a hindrance to the presentation of Christian truth. He writes:

Religion has for centuries been trying to make men exult in the ‘wonders’ of creation, but it has forgotten that a thing cannot be completely wonderful so long as it remains sensible. So long as we regard a tree as an obvious thing [...] we cannot properly wonder at it. And here we fancy that nonsense will, in a very unexpected way come to the aid of the spiritual view of things.<sup>76</sup>

The unicorn regards Alice as thoroughly unobvious, and as a result is astonished at her basic humanity. In this sense, the unicorn displays a similar attitude to the wonderment at creation presented in Psalm 8. Nonsense in this light both disturbs a purely rationalistic explanation of man and provides an account that is at once both more humble and more exalted. We laugh at the unicorn because he regards an ordinary thing as something extraordinary; but the unicorn, like the psalmist, is perfectly serious: there *is* something fearful and wonderful about human beings.<sup>77</sup> In his defence of ‘baby worship’, Chesterton seems to adopt a similar attitude to that of Carroll’s unicorn. He writes:

We do actually treat talking in children as marvellous, walking in children as marvellous, common intelligence in children as marvellous [...] Any words and antics in a lump of clay are wonderful, the child’s words and antics are wonderful, and it is only fair to say that the philosopher’s words and antics are equally wonderful. We should probably come nearer to the true conception of things if we treated all grown-up persons, of all titles and types, with precisely that dark affection and dazed respect with which we treat infantile limitations.<sup>78</sup>

It is of course comical to suggest that we should clap the politician on the back for simply managing to get dressed in the morning, but there is a certain sense in which a deep humility would be born from introducing nonsensical wonder to everyday events, chiefly because the response of astonishment refuses to take accomplishment for granted (in the instance of Psalm 8 the remarkable creation of human beings and God’s love for each

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<sup>76</sup> G. K. Chesterton ‘A Defence of Nonsense’ in *The Defendant*, p. 69.

<sup>77</sup> Psalm 139:14.

<sup>78</sup> G. K. Chesterton, ‘A Defence of Baby Worship’, pp. 150-1.

individual). This suggests that theological wonder is not exactly a matter of taking things seriously, but rather, as we discussed in the previous chapter, it concerns a perpetual childlike astonishment at God's love, grace and power. This is magnified, rather than subverted, by nonsensical wonder because the subjects of wonder are mundane objects that are made wonderful by the spirit of nonsense comedy.

Sewell is keen to emphasise nonsense's strong predilection for the ordinary;<sup>79</sup> she comments on Carroll's re-writing of the well-known poem, 'The Star'<sup>80</sup> and observes that its absurdity is located not only in the incongruous association of bats and tea-trays, but also in the substitution of the ethereal (star, diamond) for the ordinary and earthly. The act of making commonplace things extraordinary is, as Chesterton has indicated, an excellent expression of theological wonder. For the Christian, as long as God's love for man remains an astonishing fact, man himself remains humble and gracious.

### iii) The Limits and Terrors of Reality

*If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain.*

1 Corinthians 15:14

Polhemus' third reason for seeking to divorce theology from nonsense is that he believes the latter, unlike religion, has the ability to traverse 'the limits and terrors of reality'. Polhemus explains: 'People need to believe that the limits and terrors of reality can be changed, that the future can be different and better, that wonderful things can happen; if religious institutions cannot do these things, something else must'.<sup>81</sup> He believes

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<sup>79</sup> Sewell asks, 'What is there about bats and tea-trays that makes them more suitable for Nonsense than stars and diamonds? [...] The other subtraction, that of a tea-tray for a diamond, works on much the same principles, abandoning beauty, rarity, preciousness and attraction for ordinariness'. Elizabeth Sewell, *The Field of Nonsense*, pp.100-1.

<sup>80</sup> The version offered by the Mad Hatter follows thus: 'Twinkle, twinkle, little bat!/How I wonder what you're at!/Up above the world you fly,/Like a tea-tray in the sky'. Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, p. 57.

<sup>81</sup> Robert Polhemus, *Comic Faith*, p. 269.

nonsense can do this for a variety of reasons, but primarily because nonsense plays with and imaginatively breaches the boundaries of human experience.

Polhemus sees humour as the tool by which humanity has the power to transform an attitude of fear, and argues that this institutes a secular faith in the place of a religious one. 'It isn't God,' Polhemus stresses, 'but the power of humor that takes away death's sting'.<sup>82</sup> He offers the following example from *Through the Looking-Glass*:

'...you may observe a Bread-and-butter-fly...'  
'And what does *it* live on?'  
'Weak tea with cream in it.'  
A new difficulty came into Alice's head. 'Supposing it couldn't find any?' she suggested.  
'Then it would die, of course.'  
'But that must happen very often,' Alice remarked thoughtfully.  
'It always happens,' said the Gnat.<sup>83</sup>

From this passage, Polhemus describes an experience of the unseriousness of death, a sensation that he cannot seem to articulate without using religious language:

Death jokes are actually resurrection jokes, they announce that there is nothing which the life-force of the mind can't transform into vital pleasure [...] We cannot understand the prevalence of black humor—any more than we can understand the belief in hell—without seeing that it performs a kind of theological function. Joking about death is one of the most sophisticated ways that we have of combating its menace—of accepting it and defying it at the same time.<sup>84</sup>

Polhemus' ability to transform the darkness of death into something lighter via nonsense humour seems to be an excellent, if unwitting, demonstration of the religious potential of nonsense. It is true that within nonsense worlds, everyday limitations upon reality are frequently traversed and undercut. It is also true that 'terrors' within nonsense tend to be short-lasting and quickly forgotten. Neither of these tendencies is necessarily religious. However, the idea that the reader's imaginative experience underground or through the looking-glass can overcome the horrors of real life *is* a theological statement and this is attested to by Polhemus' inability to disassociate his secular belief from religious language.

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 271.

<sup>83</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*, p. 134.

<sup>84</sup> Robert Polhemus, *Comic Faith*, p. 272.

Polhemus makes a vital theological statement: death jokes *are* resurrection jokes and they serve ‘a kind of theological function’. One could go further though and suggest that death can only be seen as a sort of joke *because of* the resurrection.<sup>85</sup> Martin Luther describes salvation as Christ’s usurpation of the ‘rights’ and ‘power’ of death. He writes: ‘it was a strange battle where death and life struggled. Life won the victory, it has swallowed up death [...] death has become a mockery’.<sup>86</sup> Given that Christianity describes Christ’s victory as enduring, there are grounds for suggesting that even apparently non-religious ‘death jokes’ may participate in the ultimate mockery of death: the resurrection. The earlier reflection on miracles led to the conclusion that *if* Christianity is true, it could overcome the limits and terrors of this-worldly reality, because it is subversive to those limits and ontologically opposed to those terrors, as they are post-edenic without being pre-parousia.

It would seem, then, that there are two conclusions we can draw from this: firstly, that if there is a God, who has a plan for human salvation, where the future really is radically different and the limits of reality are altered, then nonsense can in some analogous sense participate in this celebration of redemption. Alternatively, if there is no god, or if that deity does not grant human salvation, either because he is unable or unwilling, then nonsense cannot bring the reader any closer to overcoming terrors or limits of reality, except as a temporary measure in the form of mental escape from that reality. In suggesting that nonsense literature provides an imaginative basis for transforming humanity’s attitude of fear, Polhemus unwittingly advances a theological

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<sup>85</sup> Catherine Pickstock proposes a similar idea, except her focus is on story rather than humour. Just as Polhemus suggests all death jokes are resurrection jokes, Pickstock describes all stories as resurrection stories: ‘For, on the one hand, “death” construed as a nihilistic dereliction might be the end of every story; on the other hand, it ends the *possibility* of story. And so every story is by definition a resurrection story, and it is thus that we can read the Gospel stories as narrating the story which sets out the transcendental condition for every story. Yet, since the resurrection ensures that there is no final death to end the story, Jesus’ story is at once the story which makes stories possible, and the impossible story which never ends’. Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing*, pp. 265-6.

<sup>86</sup> Francis Browne’s English translation of Martin Luther’s words as set by Bach in Cantata 4.

statement and offers valuable evidence that the non-believer may be able to participate in a religious experience through engaging with literary nonsense.

#### 4. Salvific Extravagance

*In him was life, and the life was the light of men.*

John 1:4

Having considered some of the potential difficulties that might be encountered in drawing an analogy between religious belief and literary nonsense, I want in this section to examine the ways that literary nonsense can offer a true and helpful method for interacting with Christian theology, with particular emphasis on the doctrine of Salvation. Any exploration of soteriology involves the balancing of future promise with present experience and to this extent it is true to say that soteriology is always concerned with an end beyond what is possible now.

The Bible likewise situates salvation in the present as well as the future. Paul preaches ‘now is the day of salvation’<sup>87</sup> whilst Peter tells us salvation is ‘kept in heaven for you [...] ready to be revealed in the last time’.<sup>88</sup> By acknowledging that both are correct Christianity disturbs our conventional understanding of temporality, as it preaches a paradoxical both/and time frame. Giving equal emphasis to both teachings allows soteriology to speak in its own terms, although these are terms which stray outside quotidian conceptions of the possible. In this sense, then, salvation can be described as ‘extravagant’<sup>89</sup>, insofar as it is *extra-vagant*<sup>90</sup> and involves wandering beyond the given, and straying outside the possible.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> 2 Corinthians 6:2.

<sup>88</sup> 1 Peter 1:4-5.

<sup>89</sup> Salvation can also be defined as extravagant under the more common interpretation of extravagant as over-generous, excessive, abundant or extreme. God’s love is over-abundant for humanity; the sending of Himself in Christ to die on the Cross can be seen as an extravagant gesture of grace.



If nonsense is a discourse that can help to express what it means to live in accordance with the promise and actuality of salvation, we need to locate within nonsense moments which not only go beyond purely rational limitations of experience but also in some sense correspond to a ‘salvific extravagance’. It would be of limited value to theology if nonsense simply broke down present conditions without opening up an analogous participation in something outside the quotidian. This is not to say that literary nonsense *does* provide an exhaustive eschatological analogy—as we have mentioned soteriology is not a simple looking-glass reversal—however, I do wish to argue that nonsense literature contains within its structure some important ways of engaging the imagination, which closely identify with a Christian attitude to living in the light of salvation.

### **i) Final Seriousness**

*I came that they may have life and have it abundantly*

John 10:10

We have already looked at the idea that salvation involves passing from the state of deadness in sin to new life in Christ. This new life is described in the gospels as ‘abundant life’, expressing a sense of extravagant vitality—a life that experiences God’s over-generous love and his excessive gesture of grace. This new life in Christ also calls the individual to live on the margins of society, always in part oriented elsewhere, already assuming a ‘citizenship in heaven’.<sup>92</sup> Among other consequences, living life abundantly seems to involve the Christian assuming two particular roles: the Child of God and the

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<sup>90</sup> late 14c., from M.L. *extravagantem*, originally a word in Canon Law for uncoded papal decrees, prp. of *extravagari* ‘wander outside or beyond,’ from L. *extra* ‘outside of’ + *vagari* ‘wander, roam’. Extended sense of ‘excessive, extreme’. <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=extravagant>.

<sup>91</sup> Gavin Hopps also uses a similar concept of extravagance in relation to the Christian liturgy. Cf ‘Romantic Invocation: A Form of Impossibility’, p. 49.

<sup>92</sup> Philippians 3:20.

Fool for Christ. Both have an extravagant dimension: the child of God knows he is fully provided for and lives amidst extravagant love and joy. He is carefree and light-hearted. The fool for Christ lives an *extra-vagant* lifestyle, straying beyond the boundaries of respectability never fully centred in the world, heeding a wisdom which comes from elsewhere. Both of these roles crucially involve an anti-serious element, not because they are dissociated from realities that we may consider ‘serious’, such as hard work, suffering and death but because they interpret God’s reality as far more serious than any worldly telos.

Karl Barth in *Ethics* maintains that an important effect of salvation upon the believer is the understanding that ‘ultimately, in the last resort, our life is truly only a game’.<sup>93</sup> Barth explains this is a direct result of believing that the only truly ‘serious’ event in history was (and is) Jesus Christ’s life, death and resurrection. Accepting this, Barth says, ‘we cannot allot final seriousness to what we do here and now. We do it under the divine patience which gives us time, but not with the significance of eternal action’.<sup>94</sup> In this we find a suggestion, from an orthodox theologian not noted for his levity, that believing in salvation encourages a response to the world and an individual’s place in it which is freed from ultimate seriousness by approaching life as a game.

Nonsense has as curious relationship to seriousness. Carroll’s cast of absurd creatures all take themselves and their business seriously. In fact, it is often the sombre and earnest devotion to their cause which creates the nonsense humour. Take for example Tweedledum’s anguish at his spoilt rattle:

‘Do you see *that?*’ he said, in a voice choking with passion, and his eyes grew large and yellow all in a moment, as he pointed with a trembling finger at a small white thing [...] Tweedledum cried in a greater fury than ever. ‘It’s *new*, I tell you—I bought it yesterday—my nice NEW RATTLE!’ and his voice rose to a perfect scream.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Karl Barth, *Ethics*, p. 504.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 505.

<sup>95</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*, p. 146.

The reader of course is not encouraged to pity Tweedledum but to laugh at his outrage. However, if the rattle were substituted for an expensive car then we might be expected to respond with a degree of empathy, but given the context, the reader is not meant to take Tweedledum's reaction seriously. The scene progresses and he prepares to fight his brother insisting that Alice deck him out in 'bolsters, blankets, hearth-rugs, table-cloths, dish-covers and coal-scuttles'.<sup>96</sup> In this scene Carroll takes what actually is a serious situation (a fight between two brothers) and makes light of it by overemphasising its solemnity: "“You know,” he [Tweedledum] added very gravely, “it’s one of the most serious things that can possible happen to one in a battle—to get one’s head cut off.” Alice laughed loud: but she managed to turn it into a cough, for fear of hurting his feelings'.<sup>97</sup> Tweedledum actually makes a perfectly reasonable statement, it is of course one of the worst possible eventualities of a battle. However, picturing the scene (perhaps with the aid of Tenniel's drawing) of an oversized schoolboy, padded out with cloth and saucepans, preparing to duel over a rattle, the reader is encouraged to laugh along with Alice at the ridiculous solemnity displayed by Tweedledum.

When we close the book, I wonder, does our laughter die or does an echo remain? Is there any case for suggesting that laughing at nonsensical situations translates to the ability to take lightly our own anguish? Both the child and the fool embody this making light of seriousness in different ways, and both occupy central positions in nonsense literature. What I want to consider in the rest of this section is whether the foolish wit and childish play of nonsense share any likeness with the attitudes of God's child and Christ's fool.

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

## ii) The Child of God

*For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!'*

Romans 8:15

Barth's interpretation of Christian living as breaking free from seriousness participates in the biblical message that salvation involves becoming God's child: 'we now start with the fact that the divine command is also that of the Father whose children we are'.<sup>98</sup> In the previous chapter on the childlike, it was concluded that a prerequisite of salvation involves assuming a childlike status before God. We have similarly found that in the practice of reading nonsense, there is a shift away from adult thinking to a childlike imagining, and this is one of the foremost reasons that nonsense, like Christianity, breaks away from seriousness.

The theme of regression dominates Polhemus' attempt to establish a 'secular faith' derived from Carroll's nonsense. 'In all comedy', he writes, 'there is something regressive that takes us back to the world of play that we first knew as children. And if all comic literature somehow involves regression, many will naturally find it frivolous'.<sup>99</sup> Barth describes a similar 'frivolity' that ought to be identifiable in the redemptive play of the children of God. He writes, 'we should not fail to say that as God's children we are in fact released from the seriousness of life and can and should simply play before God'.<sup>100</sup> Christianity, properly understood, does not advocate regressive infantilism, but reverses the idea that mature adult seriousness is more 'grown up' than childlike playfulness. This corresponds with Eckhart's expression of the eternal play of the Trinity and seems to call for our participation in that infinite expression of joyfulness. Barth expresses that this invitation to play is in fact the one vital and emphatic mode of Christian being:

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 497.

<sup>99</sup> Robert Polhemus, *Comic Faith*, p. 248.

<sup>100</sup> Karl Barth, *Ethics*, p. 504.

We are not only permitted but commanded to find the concept of our essential relationship to God in the promise that we are his children in the sense of his *little* children [...] We must not play the part, then, of adult sons and daughters of God who gradually come to be on a level with their father [...] We are always, in fact, his *little* children.<sup>101</sup>

Barth seems to be adamant that the childlike is not merely a helpful mode for certain individuals to think theologically. He accepts that no ultimate seriousness can be allotted to anything accomplished here and now,<sup>102</sup> believing everything has been (and will be) accomplished on the Cross and at the Parousia. ‘From this angle’, explains Barth, ‘we can regard our action only as play [...] We have simply to realize that we are children, and will be so to the very end’.<sup>103</sup>

For all their differences, Polhemus and Barth use very similar language. They both tell us there is a specific connection between play and being like children and both indicate that this makes the activity free from seriousness and can have the appearance of frivolity. Barth describes this mode of frivolity as ‘Christian relaxation’: ‘relaxation of man as such, of his whole present being as a creature’.<sup>104</sup> By adopting this attitude to the world, the child of God—assured of Christ’s victory and trustful of God’s promises—is reborn *beyond* seriousness, and even *amidst* suffering and sorrow he is called to embody a joyous frivolity. Barth explains: ‘in the present we are still sick and frail. We are still imprisoned, bound and confined [...] Nevertheless—here is the point—there is a release and relaxation even in this sighing’.<sup>105</sup> This suggests that living an extravagant life of joy and trust is not a matter of pretending that there is no suffering, but rather entails approaching experiences with a certain degree of detachment enabled by an eschatological perspective.

The imagination of the child of God possesses the capacity to overturn and break down obstacles that appear to demand a more serious response. So, for example, the

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Paraphrased from Karl Barth, *Ethics*, p. 505.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 503.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p. 502.

preoccupation with economic success and worldly status, or the fear of death, illness and failure are ‘serious’ concerns that disturb what according to Barth should be the *gamelike* quality of life lived in the conviction of salvation. *Seriousness* for Barth comes into operation when the eschatological imagination is in some way hindered. Literary nonsense seems to encourage a similar imaginative suspension of the serious. The worlds of nonsense fiction are of course far from utopic and terrible things happen to characters. But as Sewell explains, this is all done with a ‘detachment of those involved [...] and so it does not matter if they meet with dreadful fates’.<sup>106</sup> Several good examples of this aspect of literary nonsense are found in the limericks of Edward Lear:

There was an Old Man of the Nile,  
Who sharpened his nails with a file,  
Till he cut off his thumbs, and said calmly, ‘This comes  
Of sharpening one’s nails with a file!’<sup>107</sup>

Lear’s character shows a remarkable detachment to his physical anguish emphasised by the calm manner with which he articulates his predicament. Sewell describes this manner of detachment as a ‘robust carelessness towards characters and objects’.<sup>108</sup> Of course, there is a crucial distinction here: nonsense can take these things lightly because it is a purely fictional world with a cartoon ontology. By contrast, from a Christian perspective, whilst on the one hand there is no diminution of the immediate suffering, Christians are at the same time enjoined to see it in a wider perspective from which suffering is not ultimate.<sup>109</sup> ‘We cannot’, as Barth says, ‘be totally serious as the children of God’.<sup>110</sup>

In other words both nonsense and Christianity demand a degree of imaginative frivolity to enter into difficult experiences with an attitude of childlike play. On this

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<sup>106</sup> Elizabeth Sewell, *The Field of Nonsense*, p. 141.

<sup>107</sup> Edward Lear, *Complete Nonsense* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1994) p. 49.

<sup>108</sup> Elizabeth Sewell, *The Field of Nonsense*, p. 138.

<sup>109</sup> This is, of course, a very difficult subject to write about since suffering is extremely delicate and problematic territory. One way of addressing the problem might be to suggest that there is a discrepancy between what we tell ourselves and how we act pastorally. The Bible does invite the individual to take his own suffering lightly (such an example is found in 2 Corinthians 4:14 ‘for this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison’), but how we communicate this to another person in the face of their suffering requires a deep empathy and sensitivity.

<sup>110</sup> Karl Barth, *Ethics*, p. 511.

matter, Barth is resolute: 'you live in and by the fact that you are the child of God, that you already stand at his side, triumphing over the contradiction and the limits of your existence [...] Act as one who lives in and by this gift'.<sup>111</sup> To act and live in the belief that God has already triumphed over every cause for sorrow suggests that Christianity has an ontological warrant for thinking and acting in a manner of extravagant frivolity.

It is worth remarking that without the conviction that the non-serious may be a religious posture many nonsense critics seem to feel it necessary to temper or defend the frivolity of the fiction, as if nonsense in itself is not serious enough to warrant intellectual study. Polhemus admits that literary nonsense *seems* frivolous but qualifies that although *some* find comic regression frivolous, 'I see the comic regression in *Through the Looking-Glass* as profound'.<sup>112</sup> Polhemus has to claim that nonsense humour is not mere frivolity because otherwise he cannot draw meaning from it. Nonsense thus becomes a pseudo-frivolity since it is covertly transformed into something else in an attempt to save its significance.

A *theology* of nonsense, by contrast is possible precisely because nonsense is not a pseudo-frivolity, it actually *is* a frivolous activity. From a theological perspective, nonsense is not an extravagant frivolity if there is an underlying expectation of 'profound' thought. Barth tells us that 'art is always play',<sup>113</sup> and this is because 'in art we venture not to take present reality with final seriousness'.<sup>114</sup> For the Christian it is a duty not to take reality too seriously, but from a secular point of view, deconstructing the seriousness of a subject could be seen as a devaluation of meaning. This is particularly problematic for Polhemus, as he not only wants to use art to say something meaningful about the world, but also wants to construct a secular faith by showing that there is something more

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<sup>111</sup> See Karl Barth, *Ethics*, p. 501.

<sup>112</sup> Robert Polhemus, *Comic Faith*, p. 248.

<sup>113</sup> Karl Barth, *Ethics*, p. 509.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 508.

profound to art than just play. For Barth, it is precisely *because* there is nothing more to art than just play that it is profound, and also religious.<sup>115</sup>

At this point we might pause and reflect that in attempting to outline how literary nonsense is relevant to faith, we have ended up describing how the categories of faith feed into the study of nonsense. This seems to be a natural consequence of defining humour and childlike play as discourses that carry with them ontological implications. Because the secular critic is without an ontological understanding of the non-serious, they are often forced to distort the genre in order to defend their study of it. We observed a similar misrepresentative defence of nonsense in the conclusion to the chapter on the childlike. Tigges found he could not let the juvenile remain juvenile because this would apparently relegate his study to a similar status. By contrast, Barth's non-serious theology of the child calls for the embrace of light-hearted modes such as nonsense play, due to the conviction that light-heartedness has intrinsic worth.

### iii) The Fool for Christ

*We were fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong, you are held in honour and we in disrepute.*

1 Corinthians 4:10

We have already commented on the frequent practice of reversal within Scripture, including the election of the foolish 'to shame the wise'.<sup>116</sup> This does not seem to be a passing comment, but a consistent and central emphasis.<sup>117</sup> It is not with hesitation but with 'boasting' that Paul describes his status as a fool to the Corinthians: 'But whatever

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<sup>115</sup> Cf. Ibid., p. 504. 'our work in relation to his is more play than work, obedient play, play in the peace of the father's house that is waiting for us, yet still play'.

<sup>116</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:27-28.

<sup>117</sup> Erasmus tells us that folly is not just an obscure strand of the Christian tradition, but rather, 'the entire Christian religion seems to bear a certain natural affinity to folly and to relate far less clearly to wisdom'. Desiderius Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, (ed.) Robert M. Adams (New York: Norton, 1989), p. 82.



anyone else dares to boast of—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast of that’.<sup>118</sup> Erasmus celebrates Paul’s teaching as ‘a high praise of folly from a high authority’<sup>119</sup> and describes folly as ‘a valuable and necessary quality of mind’.<sup>120</sup> This suggests that folly (or foolishness) is not an optional but a *necessary* attitude for the Christian to assume. It is not, however, immediately evident what precisely either Paul or Erasmus mean by ‘fool’, nor why they depict folly as an important Christian quality, since ‘fool’ also has biblical connotations of being impious and spiritually blind.<sup>121</sup>

In seeking to define the term, Jean-Yves Lacoste makes a helpful distinction between the fool and the lunatic; he explains: ‘The fool denies his belonging to the world, while the lunatic’s insanity prevents him from joining happily in human society, and the denial is not the same thing as the prevention’.<sup>122</sup> Lacoste maintains that *intention* drives folly, whereas he sees lunacy as distinctly lacking pre-meditation. Significantly, Lacoste also situates folly within the context of salvation, he observes that ‘The fool’s experience has an eschatological horizon – otherwise we could not account for it – while the lunatic’s experience is obviously devoid of such a horizon’.<sup>123</sup> Here, Lacoste identifies folly’s *extra-vagant* dimension, an otherworldly focus that is orientated towards the not-yet aspect of God’s Kingdom, appearing topsy-turvy to those upside-down.<sup>124</sup>

The tradition of Christian folly seems thus to involve the overthrowing of quotidian principles in a manner which sets the fool apart from society. Such an understanding leads the Christian theologian John Saward to remark: ‘if the world does

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<sup>118</sup> 2 Corinthians 11:21.

<sup>119</sup> Desiderius Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, p. 80.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> ‘The fool says in his heart “there is no God”’ Proverbs 14:1. See also Luke 12:20 (The Parable of the Rich Fool).

<sup>122</sup> Jean-Yves Lacoste, ‘Liturgy and Kenosis’, p. 251.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> We are reminded of Shakespeare’s portrayal of the wise fool, which plays around with our pre-conceptions of power and intelligence. His fools often speak the strongest wisdom (such as The Fool (*King Lear*), Feste (*Twelfth Night*) and Touchstone (*As You Like It*)). ‘The Fool knows that the only true madness is to recognize this world as rational. The feudal order is absurd and can be described only in terms of the absurd. The world stands upside down’. Jan Kott, *Shakespeare our Contemporary* (London: Methuen, 1964), p. 136.

not regard us as foolish it is probable that we are conformed to it'.<sup>125</sup> Accordingly, being seen as a fool is an important statement of the believer's genuine attachment to a reality elsewhere. Saward describes Paul's instruction 'be transformed by the renewal of your mind',<sup>126</sup> as 'a precept which necessarily entails non-conformity to the world and thus to its wisdom'.<sup>127</sup> Folly in a Christian context is therefore used to call into question the certainty of our *a priori* rational assumptions and the significance we attach to worldly standards and endeavours.

Robert Polhemus' interpretation of foolishness in Carroll's nonsense seems to strongly accord with this religious characterization of folly. Polhemus claims that nonsensical folly prompts us to consider whether our attitude towards a particular convention or idea is unnecessarily solemn. He writes:

Victorian intellectual life was filled with the self-important voices of sages who professed to speak in the name of science, poetry, and nature. Assuming roles, they identified their egos with cosmic intentions. Carroll ['s] [...] weapon is *reductio ad absurdum*: seizing on an authority figure's grandiose words, he takes them literally, like a child, and imagines their full implications to show how ridiculous they are.<sup>128</sup>

Almost all the characters Alice meets take themselves very seriously (like the Victorian intellectuals) but Carroll makes them ridiculous by their words and actions. For example, the White Queen's boast to Alice: 'I'll tell you a secret—I can read words of one letter! Isn't *that* grand? However, don't be discouraged. You'll come to it in time'.<sup>129</sup> Kings, Queens, courts, judgment, death, war, learnedness, rank and authority in Carroll's worlds are all dealt with in a manner that gives emphasis to their foolish sides.<sup>130</sup> Through nonsense literature, the reader is able to laugh at and ridicule institutions that he may

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<sup>125</sup> John Saward, *Perfect Fools*, p. 214.

<sup>126</sup> Romans 12:2.

<sup>127</sup> John Saward, *Perfect Fools*, p. 212.

<sup>128</sup> Robert Polhemus, *Comic Faith*, p. 225.

<sup>129</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*, p. 195.

<sup>130</sup> To this extent, Carroll's world's are *excessively* foolish, since almost all of his characters display extensive foolish tendencies. This is an interesting inversion of the traditional position of the fool, who is normally the odd one out (consider the court fool, and Shakespeare's dramatic institution of the fool). In Carroll's world Alice alone embodies a rational outlook and there is a reversal of the common dramatic troupe since in the nonsense worlds all the characters are fools (or as the Cheshire Cat remarks, 'We're all mad here'). Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, p. 51.

normally revere. Nonsense takes a grave theme (like war) and depicts it in such a way that diminishes its fearful and horrific quality by turning that which is threatening into something small and comic. Polhemus elaborates upon this idea with reference to the episode with Tweedledee and Tweedledum: ‘The comedy controls for the moment the potential horror of battle by putting it in a context of play asserting from a dispassionate point of view, which we have the power to assume, war means the ridiculous behaviour of Tweedledee and Tweedledum’.<sup>131</sup>

Barth, without any reference to the art of literary nonsense, provides us with a similar theological interpretation of this particular venture of folly. He writes, ‘like art, humour undoubtedly means that we do not take the present with ultimate seriousness, not because it is not serious enough in itself, but because God’s future, which breaks into the present, is more serious. Humour means the placing of a big bracket around the seriousness of the present’.<sup>132</sup> As we can see, without any consideration of literary nonsense, Barth has informed us of nonsense’s deeply theological core, nonsense is nonsense as long as it brackets out the seriousness of the present, and insofar as the reader must surrender his seriousness in order to engage in literary nonsense, he shares an analogous participation in the Christian practice of faithful folly. Barth emphasises that God’s future is ‘more serious’ than any worldly situation, including our own physical or psychological problems. Humour, he believes, is a way in which we can implement this perspective and aim towards the ‘eschatological horizon’ just like Lacoste’s fool.

Literary nonsense thus not only offers a respite from ‘the age of *dignity*’,<sup>133</sup> but also an active rebuttal of its over-solemnised values.<sup>134</sup> Carroll’s nonsense can help us to

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<sup>131</sup> Robert Polhemus, *Comic Faith*, p. 260.

<sup>132</sup> Karl Barth, *Ethics*, p. 511.

<sup>133</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), p. 22.

<sup>134</sup> Take for example the episode in Wonderland between the fish and frog footmen: ‘The Fish-Footman began by producing from under his arm a great letter, nearly as large as himself, and this he handed over to the other, saying, in a solemn tone, “For the Duchess. An invitation from the Queen to play croquet.” The Frog-Footman repeated in the same solemn tone, only changing the order of the words a little, “From the Queen. An invitation for the Duchess to play croquet.” They both bowed low,

see the vanity of those things we are tempted to take most seriously: death, power and the self. It should be stressed that I am by no means claiming that nonsense *intends* to present a theological message through folly; I am suggesting, rather, that nonsense cannot help it. As we have seen, for Barth, the theological significance of humour relates to moving beyond seriousness to a position of humility before God. He explains, ‘When we have first laughed at ourselves we can then laugh at others, and we can stand cheerfully the final test of being laughed at by them’.<sup>135</sup>

There is of course a significant distinction between Christian folly and nonsensical folly. Being a fool for Christ, as Lacoste observes, is pre-meditated and involves having one’s eyes set on an ‘eschatological horizon’; the foolish wit in Carroll’s nonsense does not have such an ultimate goal or purpose. However, simply by being the other of common sense, nonsense folly resists and challenges the certainty of man’s *a priori* rational assumptions. Lacoste indicates how this can be interpreted as a theological activity: ‘A human being cannot confront God without first ridding himself of the *a priori* dominion exercised by the world, no one is born the possessor of what is most proper to him; we do not gain access to ourselves without doing violence to the initial conditions of experience’.<sup>136</sup> These conditions include our intuition of the possible and the plausible. Hence, the foolish comedy of nonsense provides a comic relief from human wisdom and in so doing, participates in the activity of mental *extra-vagance*, which is akin to an eschatological faith. Lacoste speaks of the necessity of breaking down the *a priori* dominion of worldly wisdom, and this is what Christ’s fool tries to bring about, and what literary nonsense inadvertently does.

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and their curls got entangled together. Alice laughed so much at this, that she had to run back into the woods for fear of their hearing her’. Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, pp. 45-6.

<sup>135</sup> Karl Barth, *Ethics*, p. 511.

<sup>136</sup> Jean-Yves Lacoste, ‘Liturgy and Kenosis’, p. 249.

## 5. Evangelizing Nonsense

*These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also.*

Acts 17:6

So far, the investigation has been predominantly theoretical. I have addressed the principal structural devices of literary nonsense, the character of the religious imagination and identified a correlation between the two in terms of an *extra-vagant* and non-serious comportment. We can now use this information to investigate whether there are any peculiar advantages for theology in discovering an analogy with nonsense. We have established that there *is* a connection; I now want to find out what the evangelical and practical associations are.

It tends to be assumed that nonsense means a detour or lack of communication. I want to argue instead that nonsense may be both an appropriate and helpful way to speak about the divine. The relationship between theology and nonsense has been articulated by way of analogy, and to this extent, we have established a metaphorical association. It will be helpful to begin by considering the broader application of metaphor in theology and then proceed to examine the particular suitability of nonsense as a theological analogy.

The initial question I want to ask concerns *when* (if at all) metaphorical speech might be relevant in theological discourse. Perhaps the most obvious instance is in the conveyance of mystical experience. Janet Martin Soskice in her seminal work *Metaphor and Religious Language* writes that the mystic ‘often feels a crisis of descriptive language because there do not seem to be words and concepts in the common stock adequate to his or her experience’.<sup>137</sup> Soskice remarks that this leads to a heavy reliance on metaphor to communicate what appears to the individual as an ineffable experience. The use of metaphor is a commonly accepted form of communicating mystical encounters; but there

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<sup>137</sup> Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p. 151.

is often an assumption that everyday occurrences can be vocalised without resort to metaphor.

Christians, however, are in some sense involved in a daily mystical experience, and face the task of communicating an ongoing, everyday, relationship with a transcendent deity. Soskice's study reveals the mystical dimension present in all theological statements and accounts for this by drawing a distinction between 'referral' and 'definition', maintaining that God can always be referred to without ever being exhaustively defined. For this reason, she argues, metaphorical speech lies at the heart of all theological expression: 'in our stammering after a transcendent God we must speak, for the most part, metaphorically or not at all'.<sup>138</sup>

This observation certainly seems to be in-keeping with biblical language, as Chesterton reminds us: 'the diction used by Christ is quite curiously gigantesque; it is full of camels leaping though needles and mountains hurled into the sea'.<sup>139</sup> Certainly metaphor is a consistent mode of communication in Scripture, to the extent, Sallie McFague argues, that it is correct to assert that all theology is rooted in biblical metaphor. Metaphor, she insists, is primary to theology: 'We are never given a theology of the kingdom', she explains, 'but we are told stories about it [...] we are shown metaphors—pearls, seeds, camels and needles, children, hungry and thirsty strangers, maidens and a bridegroom, and so on—which image it forth'.<sup>140</sup> If we accept that metaphor is not simply a helpful tool, but forms the basis of all religious communication then we need to consider what implication this has for our analogy with literary nonsense. Is it merely a species of metaphor that works like any other? Or is there anything about it that makes literary nonsense particularly significant in the conveyance of Christian truth?

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>139</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, p. 270.

<sup>140</sup> Sallie McFague, *Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 40.

### i) Embracing Atheism

We know that in colloquial usage, nonsense is a term that is applied to faith, though it is for the most part, intended pejoratively. It might seem that the implications of the term are thoroughly detrimental to the religious cause, as the label ‘nonsense’ suggests those who hold a religious conviction are deluded. On the other hand, the established existence of the term could provide a possible point of entrance into religious discourse for the non-believer in terms they are likely to have already accepted. Could bringing nonsense into a theological grammar offer a non-threatening linguistic basis by which a theist can interact with a strong evidentialist such as A. J. Ayer? Take for example Ayer’s following statement:

To say that something transcends the human understanding is to say that it is unintelligible. And what is unintelligible cannot be significantly described [...] If one allows that it is impossible to define God in intelligible terms, then one is allowing that it is impossible for a sentence both to be significant and to be about God. If a mystic admits that the object of his vision cannot be described, then *he must also admit that he is bound to talk nonsense when he describes it.*<sup>141</sup>

What would happen if the same believer whom Ayer is attempting to trap in his verificationist rhetoric *conceded* Ayer’s point? Admittedly, in doing so, the believer would be playing a language game with Ayer, for the theist would be accepting nonsense as an analogy, in accordance with literary nonsense, rather than Ayer’s colloquial definition. However, the believer would thereby have avoided Ayer’s language trap, and instead established nonsense as a common ground.

By discussing nonsense and faith analogously we are thus effectively able to agree with the empiricist *and* affirm a religious conviction. The believer is then poised to offer the empiricist a new interpretation of nonsense, and stipulate that nonsense does not necessarily make a statement redundant or untrue, but calls for a different type of logic. As he divulges his reasons for agreeing with the empiricist, the believer has found

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<sup>141</sup> From *Language, Truth and Logic*, A. J. Ayer (p. 156) quoted in Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, p. 144. My emphasis.

he is engaged in a type of apologetics originating from the terms offered by atheism. If it is recognised that from the perspective of empiricism certain aspects of Christian faith are nonsensical, then the first practical implication we can draw from the association between faith and nonsense is an increased potential to avoid unprofitable conflict in evangelical discussion, chiefly because the apologist begins by embracing the complaints of atheism in the sphere of logical unfeasibility.

Another important consequence of exhibiting a relationship between nonsense and religion is revealed within the context of postmodern theology. John Milbank believes ‘The end of modernity [...] means the end of a single system of truth based on universal reason, which tells us what reality is like’.<sup>142</sup> He goes on to explain, ‘with this ending, there ends also the modern predicament of theology. It no longer has to measure up to accepted secular standards of scientific truth or normative rationality’.<sup>143</sup> This is the crucial message of postmodern theology: the ‘Enlightenment critique of religion boomerangs back against itself’.<sup>144</sup>

There seems to be a certain metaphysical boldness encouraged by postmodernity; the ‘boomerang’ effect has turned staunch rationalism (not theism) into an outmoded and blinkered position, the outcome of which means theology no longer has to apologise for, or suppress the fact that it does not harmonise with ‘normative rationality’, something that is now being celebrated rather than concealed. Jeffrey Robins in his introduction to *After the Death of God* articulates a similar sentiment: ‘religion has moved from being on the defensive for having to answer to reason to its contemporary rebound where it has recovered its proper sense as a faith rather than some lesser known form of knowledge’.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> John Milbank ‘Postmodern Critical Augustinianism: A Short *Summa* in Forty-two Responses to Unasked Questions’ in *God, the Gift and Postmodernism*, p. 265.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> John D. Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, Introduction by Jeffrey Robins., p. 19.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid. (Jeffrey Robins) pp. 20-21.



Such developments in postmodern thinking have unquestionably made possible a theological exploration into nonsense, and yet, whilst revelling in the spirit of postmodernity we don't want to fall into the trap of 'defending religion by attacking the Enlightenment'.<sup>146</sup> There have been a number of apt critical responses to the postmodern tendency to demonize Enlightenment principles, failing to recognise the self-evident goods that weave similar threads. John Cottingham, for example, offers an important qualification of Caputo's rejection of Enlightenment values<sup>147</sup> and discusses how certain postmodern positions are themselves indebted to modernity. 'The values of the Enlightenment', Cottingham explains, 'are part of the long journey of the human mind towards an ever fuller and more accurate understanding of the natural order'.<sup>148</sup>

Perhaps it is true that postmodern theology goes too far in its condemnation of Enlightenment thought, but its attempt to establish faith as a sufficient epistemological basis sends out a clear and important message that religion should not apologise for its lack of conformity to secular standards of reason. In a similar way, acknowledging a congruity between nonsense and theology is an unashamed recognition of the scandal of faith. This idea of awakening a sense of scandal seems to be the second practical implication we can draw from considering nonsense literature as a theological analogue.

It is worth remembering that a bold or scandalous declaration of faith is prevalent throughout the New Testament, Paul asks the Ephesians to pray that he may 'boldly proclaim the mystery of the gospel'.<sup>149</sup> This prayer can be seen as a biblical invitation to be bold about the mysterious core of Christianity, to declare there is something inexplicable and unreasonable about the good news of Christ, and to *expect* the message to be perceived with scepticism and even ridicule. In order to '*boldly* proclaim the

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<sup>146</sup> John Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension: Religion, Philosophy and Human Value* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 115.

<sup>147</sup> In particular, Cottingham believes that Caputo's interpretation of Kant 'involves a serious misunderstanding of what Enlightenment philosophy actually entails'. *Ibid.*, p. 117.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>149</sup> Ephesians 6:19-20.

*mystery* of the gospel', Christianity needs to find a way to reassert the mystery, or make the word strange again in order that it may be boldly declared. By unearthing an analogy with literary nonsense, Christianity can disturb the placid acceptance of the gospel as a 'nice story' and reawaken the strangeness of the faith: it is, in short, a way of recovering the scandal of the Gospel.

## ii) The Virtue of the Non-Moral

The next practical strength prominent in using the term 'nonsense' to describe faith is that it can help correct the common misapprehension that Christianity is exclusively concerned with observing a moral code. Atheists and agnostics will often concede that although Christianity's *metaphysical* claims are nonsense, it is still a good way to live because of its positive *ethical* standards. To seek deliberately to undercut this message therefore has the potential to sound offensive to Christianity, where Christianity has been accepted primarily for its ethical merit. However, C. S. Lewis, in his humorous collection of letters from a senior devil to a junior devil, describes the reduction of Christianity to its ethical function as a 'devilish' technique:

We thus distract men's minds from Who He is, and What He did. We first make Him solely a teacher [...] we want very much to make men treat Christianity as a means; preferably, of course, as a means to their advancement, but failing that, as a means to anything—even to social justice. The thing to do is to get a man at first to value social justice as a thing which the Enemy [God] demands, and then work on him to the stage at which he values Christianity because it may produce social justice.<sup>150</sup>

In this text, (with the devil as a mouthpiece) Lewis expresses the supreme error of placing the advantage of an ethical code above Christianity's theological truths. The point Lewis conveys is that ethics, isolated from faith, is not a different expression of the same belief, but an outright rejection of the Christian message. A sole emphasis on the morality of Christianity, as Screwtape tells us, 'distracts men's minds from Who He is, and What He

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<sup>150</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (Glasgow: Collins, 1984), pp. 118-9.

did'. Instead, Paul explains to the Romans, justification comes about through faith 'apart from works of the law'.<sup>151</sup> Of course, morality *is* an important demonstration of God's supreme goodness, but, as Paul teaches, 'the righteousness of God has been manifested *apart from the law*, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the Righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe'.<sup>152</sup> To suggest, as Paul does that both God's goodness and man's justification are manifest outside the moral law argues against the assumption that Christianity is a narrowly 'moral' religion.

The advantage of comparing nonsense literature to religion is that the genre is distinctly disassociated from the moral tale. Carroll's stories were revolutionary as they initiated the break with the conventions of children's literature by refusing to offer moral homilies. Jack Zipes explains, 'Carroll made one of the most radical statements on behalf of the fairy tales and the child's perspective by conceiving a fantastic plot without an ostensible moral purpose'.<sup>153</sup> Although there were several earlier diversions from the moral tale,<sup>154</sup> Zipes is accurate in his contention that the stories, poems and novels written for children during the time of the publication of *Alice* were predominantly intended as religious instruction. 'If literary fairytales were written and published', Zipes explains, 'they were transformed into didactic tales preaching hard work and pious behaviour'.<sup>155</sup> Carroll not only refused to present a moral resolution but blatantly mocked this Victorian preoccupation, evidenced in the exchange between the Duchess and Alice:

'You're thinking about something, my dear, and that makes you forget to talk. I ca'n't tell you just now what the moral of that is, but I shall remember it in a bit.'  
 'Perhaps it hasn't one,' Alice ventured to remark.  
 'Thu, tut, child!' said the Duchess. 'Everything's got a moral if only you can find it'.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Romans 3:28.

<sup>152</sup> Romans 3:21 (my emphasis).

<sup>153</sup> Jack Zipes quoted in *Tales for Little Rebels*, Foreword, xxii.

<sup>154</sup> For an overview of the history of the dissent from the moral tale see Jeanie Watson's 'Coleridge and the Fairy Tale Controversy' in *Romanticism and Children's Literature*, pp.14-31.

<sup>155</sup> Jack Zipes quoted in *Tales for Little Rebels*, Foreword, xiv.

<sup>156</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, p. 71.

The Duchess proceeds to describe to Alice the moral value of ‘mustard mines’, croquet games and the fact that flamingos and mustard both bite. By suggesting the moral qualities of such ludicrous ideas (especially given the dominant context of the moral tale) Carroll invites his readers to laugh at the fixation upon morality. To use a distinctly amoral fiction to propose a point of analogue with Christianity could thus be an effective method of shifting the primary focus off moral behaviour and instead prompting an individual to reconsider their diagnosis of Christianity as either oppressively legislative or simply a nice code by which to live. Rather, Christianity looks beyond the moral realm and fixes on the ultimate source of goodness, which is another type of goodness altogether. C. S. Lewis sums up the position thus:

I think all Christians would agree with me if I said that though Christianity seems at first to be all about morality, all about duties and rules and guilt and virtue, yet it leads you on, out of all that into something beyond. One has a glimpse of a country where they do not talk of those things, except perhaps as a joke. Every one there is filled full with what we should call goodness as a mirror is filled with light. But they do not call it goodness. They do not call it anything. They are not thinking of it. They are too busy looking at the source from which it comes.<sup>157</sup>

Lewis’ suggestion—that from an ultimate perspective preoccupation with morality might be joked about—intimates that associating Christianity with nonsense is not irreligious, but could be a positive way of confronting unhelpful assumptions about the religion. Rather like Lewis’ method of teaching Christian truths through the mouth of a devil, the analogy with nonsense is an apology for Christianity that recommends it by means of its opposite. Suggesting that Christianity is nonsense is really a way of commenting on the nonsense of the world and the uprightness of the upside-down kingdom

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<sup>157</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 118.

### iii) The purpose of the non-useful

In addition to not offering a moral homily, any literature wishing to be defined as nonsense must avoid concluding with any meaningful objective. Nonsense theorists commonly acknowledge the lack of utility as an essential attribute of the genre. Tigges, for example, states: ‘the game of nonsense by is played for its own sake rather than with a transcendent aim’.<sup>158</sup> Stewart likewise describes nonsense as ‘an activity where means become more important than ends’.<sup>159</sup> Carroll is often quoted for his own admission that the Alice stories ‘do not teach anything at all’.<sup>160</sup> It might seem strange to recommend nonsense as a Christian analogue on account of its apparent uselessness, why would any religion want to assert its lack of purpose?

In his work *Theology and Joy*, Jürgen Moltmann speaks out against valuing the church ‘only on the basis of *its usefulness* [...] [where] its ends are determined by morality and politics’.<sup>161</sup> He works from the central premise that ‘man is trapped in usefulness’.<sup>162</sup> Moltmann calls for a means of approaching Christianity without considering its utility. He writes: ‘Those who try to defend religion by establishing its external usefulness and necessity turn out to be its worst enemies in the long run’.<sup>163</sup> Moltmann substitutes utility for play and presents a theology of play which stems from the conviction that games interrupt the focus on goal and ‘serve as temporary suspensions of the normal state of affairs’.<sup>164</sup>

Theories of play often tend to emphasise that whilst games must appear purposeless from an external viewpoint, ‘a game is meaningful within itself’.<sup>165</sup> This

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<sup>158</sup> Wim Tigges, *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense*, p. 55.

<sup>159</sup> Susan Stewart, *Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature*, p. 119.

<sup>160</sup> Lewis Carroll to the Lowrie children, August 18, 1884, cited in *The Selected Letters of Lewis Carroll*, p. 136.

<sup>161</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology and Joy*, p. 78.

<sup>162</sup> David E. Jenkins, Introduction to *Theology and Joy*, p. 11.

<sup>163</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology and Joy*, p. 79.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31 ‘All theories about play make the point that a game is meaningful within itself but that it must appear useless and purposeless from an outside point of view’.

suggests that within even the most basic game, strategy is important, tasks have an end, costumes serve a purpose and props are functional. However, nonsensical play seems to be an interesting exception to this rule because it refuses meaning even *within* the context of its own play. For example, at the mad tea party the Hatter instigates a game of riddles: ‘Why is a raven like a writing-desk?’<sup>166</sup> The point of this game is to guess the correct answer. Alice experiences frustration, not because she fails to work out the solution, but because there isn’t one:

‘Have you guessed the riddle yet?’ the Hatter said, turning to Alice again.  
‘No, I give it up,’ Alice replied: ‘what’s the answer?’  
‘I haven’t the slightest idea,’ said the Hatter.  
‘Nor I,’ said the March Hare.  
Alice sighed wearily. ‘I think you might do something better with the time,’ she said, ‘than waste it in asking riddles that have no answers’.<sup>167</sup>

Alice does not enjoy the game of nonsense and finds it tiresome because she has learnt that all things have a purpose, even games. The problem that confronts Alice, as Tigges puts it, is that ‘the “pointe” is essentially lacking in nonsense’.<sup>168</sup> This reveals a potential danger with the game analogy; winning can easily become the purpose of the game and can in effect become a shadow version of the professional world. An ideal game metaphor would therefore need to produce new standards of game playing that are divorced from the traditional patterns of winning and losing. Whilst all play appears to be composed for its own sake, nonsense play is perhaps unique because it is supremely subversive to purpose; it does not even ‘play’ at being useful.

Carroll’s absurd Caucus Race promotes a method of play which through nonsense refuses to conform to established patterns: ‘There was no “One, two, three, and away,”’ Alice reports, ‘but they began running when they liked, and left off when they liked, so that it was not easy to know when the race was over’’.<sup>169</sup> When the contestants inquire as to the winner, the Dodo announces, ‘*Everybody* has won and *all* must have prizes’. This

<sup>166</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, p. 55.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>168</sup> Wim Tigges, *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense*, p. 257.

<sup>169</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, p. 23.

nonsense game radically diverts from the normal condition of winning where there is often a fixation on coming first or being the best.<sup>170</sup> Rather, the absurd Caucus Race is in a sense closer to ‘the game of grace’ where, as Moltmann tells us, ‘the loser wins’.<sup>171</sup> Nonsense play through rejecting purpose and end allows for the temporary suspension of achievement measured by a secular standard of accomplishment.

By introducing ‘grace’ into the system of ‘game’, it becomes once again apparent that nonsense is only conceivable as a theological analogy due to the doctrine of Salvation. Moltmann explains: ‘Easter opens up the boundary-crossing freedom to play the game of the new creation [...] The cross of Christ therefore does not belong to the game itself, but it makes possible the new game of freedom. He suffered that we may laugh again’.<sup>172</sup> This is an important qualification to highlight because it emphasises that the playful transcendence of purpose is only possible because Christ embodies and satisfies supreme purpose. ‘For this purpose I was born’, Christ states, ‘and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth’.<sup>173</sup> God’s Incarnation in Christ is understood as the manifestation of ultimate purpose and by seeing his purpose through to the end, God effectively concludes all worldly *telos*, and as such, ushers in an eternal playtime.

Perhaps, even more so than a general analogy with play, the association with nonsense subverts the categories of purpose and necessity on a grand scale. Moltmann asserts: ‘Religion refuses to answer questions concerning its practical social value and its moral usefulness. Its dignity lies precisely in that it compels us to abandon this greedy and selfish line of questioning if we are to understand religion’.<sup>174</sup> The colloquial

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<sup>170</sup> See Giles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, p. 69. ‘Not only does Lewis Carroll invent games, or transform the rules of known games (tennis, croquet), but he invokes a sort of ideal game [...] These games, [the caucus race and the croquet match] have the following in common: they have a great deal of movement, they seem to have no precise rules, and they permit neither winner nor loser. We are not “acquainted” with such games which seem to contradict themselves’.

<sup>171</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology and Joy*, p. 47.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>173</sup> John 18:37.

<sup>174</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology and Joy*, p. 79.

connotations of the term 'nonsense' as 'futile' or 'pointless' together with the refusal of the literary genre to offer a significant meaning could thus prove beneficial in the communication of Moltmann's message and the wider mission of the church, that God's purpose is greater than any social utility or personal accomplishment.



### **Conclusion: The Lunatic's Risk**

*He who loses his life will find it.*

Matthew 10:39

We have looked at some of the reasons why using literary nonsense as a theological analogue is accurate and helpful—on the one hand, for the believer, it preserves a biblical sense of scandal and at the same time it makes faith more presentable to the atheist. This project has suggested that literary nonsense can serve—albeit imperfectly—as a cosmic allegory of both man's fall and his salvation. I have described the structural principles of literary nonsense as replicating the shape of the salvific imagination. Experiencing God *can* be likened to falling down the rabbit hole—all manner of things become believable which were previously thought impossible. Certain aspects of faith seem like nonsense when the individual's dominant method of assessment is rationalistic. This is why the imagination is so vital to Christian faith, because if our inherited *a priori* faculties are upside-down then we require a radically alternative way of thinking in order to begin the process of approaching God's topsy-turvy Kingdom.

Moreover, this type of imagining might also be a useful exercise for the Christian for whom religious faith makes obvious sense. Because nonsense is a looking-glass analogy, it confronts not only the self, but also the reverse image of the self, and can therefore become a useful symbol for reminding Christians about the strangeness of their message. As such, making a connection with literary nonsense could also be beneficial for the believer who cannot understand why the Christian message is often incomprehensible to an atheist.

This thesis has suggested is that whilst Christian faith is a solemn and sensible matter, it is also extravagant, playful and foolish, and that the category of the nonsensical aids the recovery of a number of these underemphasised aspects of traditional theology.

The project has, in a sense, been a long response to Martin Heidegger's question: 'will Christian theology one day resolve to take seriously the world of the apostle and thus also the conception of philosophy as foolishness?'<sup>175</sup>

Perhaps, above all, what the analogy between faith and nonsense reminds us, is that faith is a risk. Kierkegaard reaches a similar conclusion and invokes the language of absurdity in order to highlight the risk entailed in religious belief. 'Someone', he writes, 'a serious man,' may say, 'But is it certain and definite that there is such a good, is it certain and definite that there is an eternal happiness in store?—because in that case I surely would aspire to it; otherwise, I would be lunatic to risk everything for it'.<sup>176</sup> Kierkegaard frustrates the serious man's desire for epistemic certainty because of his conviction that 'the absurd is precisely the object of faith and only that can be believed'.<sup>177</sup> Kierkegaard wants to separate faith from the language of logical probability as he sees this thirst for assurance as a barrier to religious belief. Faith is a risk precisely *because* of its noetic uncertainty and at any point an individual could come to the conclusion that it may not be true.

The suggestion that certain aspects of Christian faith are rationally indefensible thus draws attention to the daily risk involved in believing in God, which according to Richard Kropf is vital for spiritual integrity and growth: 'We cannot advance spiritually', Kropf states, 'unless we are willing to let go of the *security* that so often binds us to what is familiar or comfortable. In other words, faith involves risk'.<sup>178</sup> A heavily rationalized apologetic can often give the illusion that the 'risk' content of faith has been greatly reduced. By contrast, what an association with nonsense brings to the fore is that the risk involved in religious belief is immense.

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<sup>175</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, (ed.) William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 288.

<sup>176</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript Volume I*, p. 422.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211.

<sup>178</sup> Richard W. Kropf, *Faith, Security and Risk* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1990), p. 2.

Hugo Meynell suggests ‘the true scandal of faith is its insistence that man should surrender his illusion of self-sufficiency’.<sup>179</sup> Part of the problem, we have discovered, with over-emphasising the logical credibility of faith is that the individual is more susceptible to sustaining the ‘illusion of self-sufficiency’. Take, for example, Wolterstorff’s introduction to *Faith and Rationality* in which he describes reason as ‘something that each of us possesses intrinsically [...] Thus, to follow the voice of Reason is not to submit to some new external authority. It is to follow *one’s own* voice’.<sup>180</sup> In this thesis we have adopted Chesterton’s description of the topsy-turvy condition of man and therefore encounter a theological problem with Wolterstorff’s dictum, since, if our inner voice of reason is upside-down then following it, as he recommends, will not deliver us the right way up. The language Wolterstorff uses promotes the sufficiency of our internal powers of reasoning and so in this sense disguises the ‘scandal of faith’ and the inherent risk.

Does the believer then live in constant fear of the instability of his belief? Does faith bring with it a desperate insecurity? The assurance from the Bible is that faith is an unveiling of knowledge not previously known, which brings with it a restoration and transformation of the individual. It is in this purified state that the risk of faith is calmed: ‘blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God’.<sup>181</sup> It is not that faith, once entered into, ceases to involve any uncertainty, but that in the venture of faith, as the individual struggles against his desire for security, a new standard of assurance is revealed to the believer, although it may not seem any less certain to the atheist.

The description of faith as a risk may help to illuminate the purpose of this project; we have drawn an analogy with nonsense because it seems to be a true characterisation of aspects of Christian belief, not because we wanted to say something controversial about faith or because it seems bold and counter-intuitive. In fact, what we

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<sup>179</sup> Hugo Meynell, *Sense and Nonsense in Christianity* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1964), p. 253.

<sup>180</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, Introduction, p. 5.

<sup>181</sup> Matthew 5:8.

have described as the nonsensical component of religious belief is, viewed from the believer's perspective, simply the most accurate description of reality. For all his famous statements on the lunacy and incredulous nature of faith, Kierkegaard also reflects that 'when the believer has faith, the absurd is not the absurd—faith transforms it, but in every weak moment it is again more or less absurd to him. The passion of faith is the only thing which masters the absurd'.<sup>182</sup> In agreement with Kierkegaard, I do not seek to promote nonsense as some eternal or superior category, but to use the term to aid the passage to the other side of reason where nonsense can reveal its hidden sense. This sentiment is described beautifully by Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria*, where he writes:

the scheme of Christianity [...] though not discoverable by human reason, is yet in accordance with it; that link follows link by necessary consequence; that religion passes out of the ken of reason only where the eye of reason has reached its own horizon; and that faith is then but its continuation: even as the day softens away into the sweet twilight.<sup>183</sup>

So too as we have seen with nonsense, it is but the re-awakening of sense, at the dawn of the upside-down kingdom.

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<sup>182</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers A-E Volume One*, p. 7.

<sup>183</sup> Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* in *The Major Works* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1995), p. 482.



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